

What Is America Reading?: The Phenomena of Book Clubs and Literary Awards in Contemporary America

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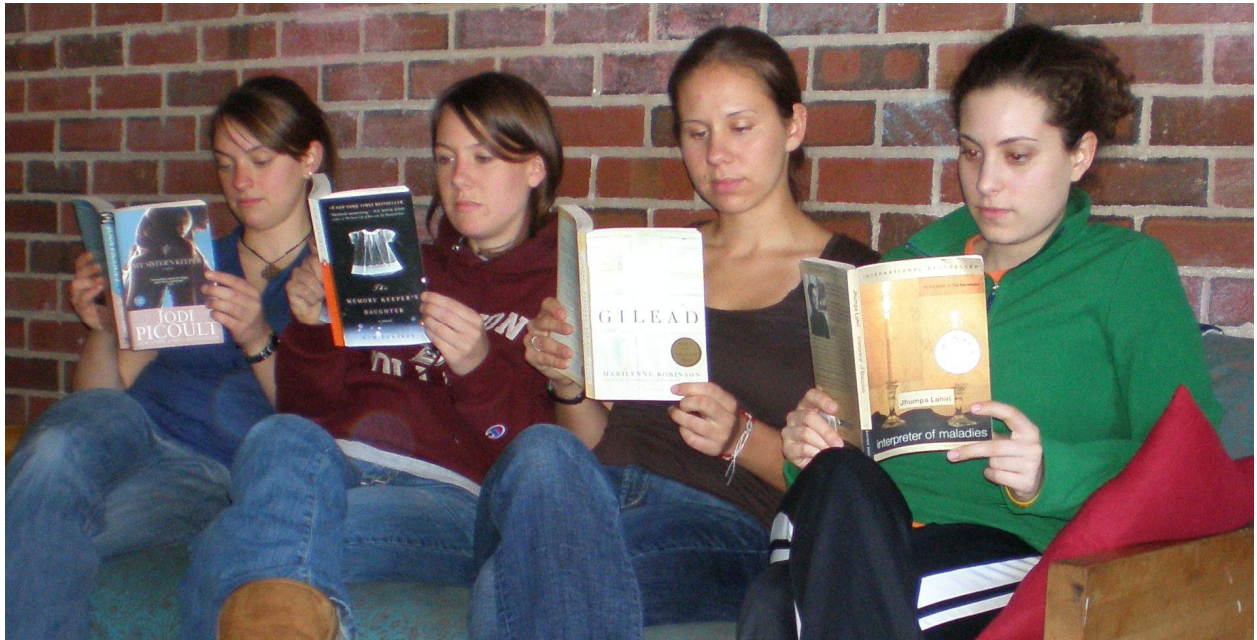
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What Is America Reading?:
The Phenomena of Book Clubs and Literary Awards in Contemporary America



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English Department Honors Thesis
Submitted April 14, 2008

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“But the act of reading, the act of seeing a story on the page as opposed to hearing it told—of translating story into specific and immutable language, putting that language down in concrete form with the aid of the arbitrary handful of characters our language offers, of then handing the story on to others in a transactional relationship—that is infinitely more complex, and stranger, too, as though millions of us had felt the need, over the span of centuries, to place messages in bottles, to ameliorate the isolation of each of us, each of us a kind of desert island made less lonely by words.”

- ANNA QUINDLEN,
HOW READING CHANGED MY LIFE

PREFACE: CONVERSATION IN BOOKS, BOOKS IN CONVERSATION

Seventeen years ago, I proudly closed the cover of *Hop on Pop* by Dr. Seuss—the first book I read on my own—and entered the literary world. I graduated from Dr. Seuss to Beverly Cleary, from Lois Lowry to Betty Smith, and ultimately have become an English major at Boston College, in order to focus my studies on reading and writing. Literature provides me an avenue to discuss morality, engage in debate about faith, and challenge societal norms. Books appeal to me for the way they initiate conversation—conversation about characters, themes, and voices, but also about authors, publishers, and new releases. I have worked as a bookseller, a publishing intern, and a student of English, and over the past four years, I have developed an interest in not only what I read—I know I enjoy fiction because of the emotional, psychological, intellectual, and artistic therapy it provides me—but also why I read it.

The summer after my freshman year at Boston College, I worked at a Borders Books and Music Store near my hometown in New Jersey. Being surrounded by walls of books for eight hours a day was both overwhelming and enthralling. Every time I reshelfed a book, I discovered three more I wanted to read. I paid attention to customers' purchases, hoping their selections would help to populate my ever-growing "To Read" list. What I observed was as much the popular titles as the sources of their popularity. The book that sold out at ten a.m. on a Tuesday morning (the day for merchandise change-outs), and received telephone and in-store requests throughout the day was the title that had been featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* the day before; this book would prove impossible to keep on the shelves for at least two weeks. The title not newly released, but holding a firm spot on the corporate scheme's weekly front table

requirements and mostly purchased in the mornings by women with children in strollers was the latest book club pick, determined by a magazine or an online guide. These titles quickly overlapped themselves on the bestseller shelf, meaning that the same book would be displayed in three different places: alphabetically in its catalogued section, on the bestseller shelf near the front door, and enduringly in whichever capacity the title first experienced its rise in reputation.

Customers walked in, swept up books from one of these three locations (usually not from the catalogued section), and were in line in an instant, with barely a glance at the thousands of other titles on the shelves. I understood that people wanted a simpler means of making a purchase than scanning the spine of every available book, but I wondered who really made the decisions to place these books in consumers' hands. Publishers' promotions buy lead table placements, but bestseller status is ultimately determined by readers. Which conversation was most influential for a reader, that media-driven conversation about what to buy, or the literary conversation the reader has directly with the author through the text? My observations led me to consider work in the publishing industry to better understand how and why people read what they do.

During the spring of my sophomore year and the summer thereafter, I was introduced to the world of publishing via two internships with children's books. At Candlewick Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in New York City, I was engaged in the process that transformed an author's scribbled pages into a bestseller. Although my work was with children's and young adults' imprints, I witnessed methods of publishing that generally apply to printed media. My positions were in marketing and publicity, which also gave me access to editorial, sales, and art. I

saw the close relationship between an author and an editor, the different relationship between an author and a publicist, and the ways in which design and sales contribute to make books available to distributors, to media, and ultimately to readers.

My job was to make sure magazines, television, radio, and the public knew about books before they were released. We introduced audiences to new authors, excited readers about sequels, and played up themes relevant to current topics. Hits in other media were crucial to selling our books over those on other publishers' lists. While working as a bookseller, I promoted whatever our store had to offer. As an intern, I encouraged the sales of one company's product, which meant the source of the book was more important than the quality. Months were devoted to planning marketing strategy for each season's titles. I learned placement on front tables was bought at bookstores, coinciding with the shop's commitment to purchase a certain volume of that book. I also sent out countless award application packages. Much time and money was spent shipping stacks of books across the country, because a literary or consumer award nomination offered the validated recognition that publishers crave. Certain bookstores were similarly targeted on author tours to pump up ratings on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. When one of our books made that list, a clipping from the paper was proudly hung on the office wall, our title, author, and publisher's name glowing in a stream of yellow highlighter, proclaiming victory.

Even with my new knowledge about the workings of the industry, I still found it difficult to gauge which level of promotion had the most profound consequence for what consumers bought, even for what I bought. My experience in publicity taught me how great a role the publisher plays in choosing where to place a book in a store, or in trying

to land a spot in a magazine or on a certain book list. As a bookseller, I watched people react to marketing schemes and started to consider where the conversations about books came from, who started them, and what their goals were. I know that as a reader, I prefer to rely on the recommendation of a trusted personal source, but cannot definitively measure the effects of the media on my reading selections. I decided to look directly to the texts, with the hope that the quality of the literature would explain why certain books appeal to readers.

My first experience with definitive fiction categorization was in high school, with annual summer reading lists. Each year, the list was populated with titles under three headings. “A” denoted the “Classics,” works by famous authors of the Western tradition that were not otherwise included in the school’s curriculum; “B” included “Diversity” novels, those with a cultural side: African, Native American, Asian, etc.; “C” was termed the “Leisure” list, and comprised books like romances by Danielle Steel, which might be considered “beach books.” Beyond this hierarchy determined by the academic powers that be, the distributed book list also had instructions as to what students enrolled in each course level were required to read. As an honors student, I was required to read four books, two from A, and one each from B and C. The college preparatory level, the next highest achieving group, was required three reads, one from each list. Lower level courses were obliged just two books from any list. Unfortunately, just as I was old enough to start choosing books for myself and to discover what kind of story I most enjoyed, I was confronted with a structure I assumed applied to all literature.

My mother always told me I could read whatever I wanted to read (with the exception of comic books), but now there were values placed on different “types” of

literature. The classics were known to be brilliant, but as a high school student, I often had difficulty comprehending them. While my studies as an English major have helped me to appreciate the cultural and historical contexts and the masterful writing of the classics, the titles I remember reading from my high school list were those on lists B and C, those that were deemed less valuable to my education. I understood the “cultural” books were important for the differences they represented, rather than celebrated for the reflections of humanity they could offer. The “leisure” category suggested a distinction between those books read to be studied, and those read for pleasure, which I now recognize as ingrained into the way I think about books. My high school summer reading introduced me to new authors and offered important reading experiences, but I regret the way I interpreted the system. I was taught a hierarchy of fiction with a social dynamic in the lesson, which fuels my interest in what I have learned to call middlebrow fiction.

My definition of “middlebrow” is that book that straddles the line between literary and commercial fiction. I am interested in how it functions as reading material for today’s American reader personally and intellectually, as well as what the categorization indicates about the audience to which this fiction is geared. The term “middlebrow” is a social distinction, derived from an old understanding of “the height of the brow originally derived from phrenology and [which] carried overtones of racial differentiation” (Rubin xii). “Middlebrow” as a cultural term refers to a median “on which cultural life could thrive,” that is, where the most people could be reached (Rubin xii). The extreme terms, “highbrow,” which was “in the 1880s, already synonymous with ‘refined,’” and “lowbrow,” which “came to denote a lack of cultivation,” were originally meant to convey distinctions of intellect (Rubin xii). “Middlebrow” was first used to refer strictly

to the reading public by Margaret Widdemer, who defined such a reader as a “‘fairly civilized, fairly literate’” man or woman, who was “[l]ocated between the ‘tabloid addict class’ and the ‘tiny group of intellectuals,’” and represented the majority of readers (Rubin xii-xiii).

In America in the early twentieth century as much as today, the middlebrow reader reads for personal satisfaction and to improve social status. The democratization of reading that accompanied the earlier era’s expansion in publishing led to mixed reviews. Some critics were delighted to see “average” people involved with literature. Others were irate to see their “high” culture degraded by becoming popular. The tension between aesthetic ideals and mass distribution feeds the questions I pose about the literary and commercial values of middlebrow literature, and how they are perceived and received in contemporary American culture.

Ever since the United States was a network of chartered colonies on “new” shores, reading has been an aspect of culture associated with political and economic success. At that point, reading was primarily relevant to those people who were not members of the gentry, but who were interested in cultivating themselves in the same ways (their purchasing habits in order to obtain this level of culture were also significant in the development of today’s consumerism) (Rubin 1). Cultivation was grounded in culture and character, two virtues which, it was supposed, could be fostered through reading. With the explosion of the publishing industry in the first decades of the nineteenth century, books were suddenly available to people outside of the aristocracy. “Economic and social barriers to refinement fell” because the general populace could now access books that were previously available to only an elite minority (Rubin 3).

From the start, Christian values guided the distinctions between publications that remain in contemporary American fiction today. When “the devotional texts that had formed the core of traditional literacy in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England” were replaced with “an abundant print culture characterized by the casual, widespread reading of fiction, journalism, and instructional volumes on myriad subjects,” the much increased volume of new titles caused what some considered a kind of chaos (Rubin 17). The expansion meant that the gentry’s moral and aesthetic ideals were more accessible, but so too were cheap, lowbrow novels. Some critics recognized in this situation the need for someone to pick the “best” of these books; the catalog of new titles was simply too large for individual readers to navigate alone. Others, representing the Christian morality that still largely permeated American culture, felt threatened, arguing that “the entertaining ‘quick read’ had no place in Christian nurture” (Rubin 19). They hoped to “counteract the tendency of the publishing explosion to foster vulgarity rather than refinement” (Rubin 19). These values endure—they seem to have informed my high school reading list—but they are presently being challenged. The range of courses to which I have been exposed at Boston College attests to a more tolerant attitude toward the varieties of literature. Even at my high school, the current reading list has rejected the three-category approach and integrated all its titles onto a common list.

Highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow fiction distinctions certainly have strong roots in American print culture, but they are nothing if not fluid in each era. One contemporary critic emphasizes the role of culture, suggesting that the “measures of literary quality are not self-evident truths but, rather, social constructs” (Rubin xix). She holds the traditional view that, “learning to apprehend the workings of form and language

in the books that critics have, over time, judged ‘best’ affords readers a richer life—a deeper humanity—than they might otherwise experience,” but she does not blindly dismiss the potential value of different kinds of publications (Rubin xix). Harsher criticism defines literary categories as an effect of the industry, rather than the reader.

The category of the lowbrow was understood to include all standardized cultural objects that were generated through a corporately organized mode of production, including moving pictures, radio programs, and pulp novels. The space of the middlebrow was occupied by products that supposedly hid the same machine-tooled uniformity behind the self-consciously worked mask of culture. (Radway 222)

With these observations in mind, I find myself drawn to middlebrow fiction because it is where the literary and the commercial—art and industry—most fascinatingly intersect. The classics are dependent on history, culture, and sociological contexts that are more relevant to academics than to the average reader. Genre fiction is too narrowly defined by its mechanical structure and predictable shape; I agree that this category has little hope of “deepening” a reader’s “humanity.” Middlebrow books, though, approach enduring themes of family, love, and loss within a timely structure, and are thus the most accurate gauge of a culture’s literary climate.

In the twentieth century, concrete attempts have been made to create libraries geared specifically toward the middlebrow reader. In the early part of the century, John Erskine, a member of the Columbia University English department, formulated a “great books” curriculum, pulling together the various writings from ancient times to the present that have had an effect on the western cultural tradition, ““those which...surprise us by remaining true even when our point of view changes”” (Rubin 165). While his selections for the most part populate our “classics” lists today, Erskine’s goal was to encourage “the ordinary person’s capacity to understand literature” (Rubin 168). The Book-of-the-

Month Club (BOMC) took a similar view in appealing to the masses, but had less faith in the public's literary skill set. The BOMC was geared toward finding a balance of "integrity, morality, and literary standards [...] at the heart of an institution inextricably tied to advertising and consumption" (Rubin 143). There were limitations to the quality of the books they offered, because the selection board was also trying to sell to the majority audience. The board did not share Erskine's confidence in the average reader, and "[t]he rise of literary modernism, by challenging conventional uses of form and language" meant that those books that included "experiments with form and language" and "explorations of the darker side of the human condition" did not make the list (Rubin 32, 147). Financially, unconventional literature was impractical: a book about Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays "made for easier reading than Emerson's essays," but still "was the most serious—and financially disastrous—of the club's early selections" (Rubin 146).

The BOMC and similar institutions "intensified the ongoing debate about the consequences of mass-produced standardization, especially within the literary field" (Radway 221). The argument was that the independent American does not need someone telling her what to read; it seemed that culture was being centralized in a way that undermined American individuality. Despite the threat to established forms of literary authority, book clubs and literary prizes have remained and even flourished in recent years. It is this collision of industry and art that piques my interest in middlebrow fiction.

My passion for literature—in an academic and in a personal context—is founded in books' invitations to conversation. I love to discuss not only form, style, and characters, but also my psychological and emotional experiences as a reader. In the same way that books can be neatly organized into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow fiction,

conversations about books might also be categorized according to such distinctions. Highbrow would be the subject of literary criticism, the conversations of academia, which are concerned with the text itself, how the author uses setting, irony, suspense, etc. Book reviews are popular assessments of the media. They are interested in which books are (or will be) read, why, and by whom. Conventionally, literary award winners are more likely to receive criticism and “book club books” are more likely to win review space on a newspaper’s book page. The category of middlebrow fiction falls between these conversations, and complicates the questions of how and why people talk about books.

As an English major, I have long perceived literary criticism as a purely academic tool. I was briefly introduced to the various schools of literary criticism in a junior year high school assignment and in *Narrative and Interpretation* freshman year at Boston College, but beyond that, criticism has rarely influenced my studies. I suspect Erskine’s theory is in part responsible, because more often than not, I have been asked to look directly to a text to develop my own interpretation. In both high school and college I have more often been dissuaded from using secondary sources than encouraged to engage literary criticism in my responses to literature. For older or esoteric works, like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where certain allusions are incomprehensible to modern readers, I understand criticism to be important for the researched explanations of objects and events. As an element of my reading experience, though, criticism seemed to me like learning with rote memorization instead of a hands-on experiment—in one instance one is told, in the other, one does. Consequently, I have avoided research papers before this project, yet I cannot be sure how much of that attitude is my nature as a reader and how much has

been taught to me. Working with contemporary fiction in this thesis, I recognize the practical value of placing a work of fiction in the greater literary and cultural scheme. This kind of conversation, which has been carried on over decades or even centuries about some books, I now appreciate as not limited to the university. I see that it is practical in any reader's experience.

Book reviews, another form of literary conversation, offer a different perspective because they record initial responses to new publications. Currently, reviews are losing credibility, in part because of their short-sighted nature. They appear less frequently in print media, and those that are run are criticized for hyperbole, vague generalities, and lack of critical recommendations. In her book *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, reviewer Gail Pool defensively argues that a "cultural mainstream" exists in the book industry, only fostered by book review pages, that minimizes the chances for worthy books to be reviewed fairly and offer the public valid recommendations (31). Similar to the BOMC, which wanted to recommend quality books but also to make a sale, book reviews are too entangled with publishers, reviewers, and space on book pages to offer decent evaluations of new books.

Popular fiction author Anna Quindlen writes in her book *How Reading Changed My Life* that, "Reading is like so much else in our culture, in all cultures: the truth of it is found in its people and not in its pundits and its professionals" (13-14). People read for a variety of reasons, and that is reflected in what people say about what they have read, as well as in how they choose what to read. Some people read off *The New York Times* Bestseller List. Others primarily select books from online reading group lists. I take my books from a combination of sources, but trust most those recommendations from friends

who have proved to have tastes and interests similar to mine. Essentially, each of these options is a derivative of some sort of conversation, a variation of word-of-mouth. Literature today faces the challenge of being read in the midst of hundreds of thousands of titles published each year. Book forums like those mentioned above are descendants of those from the early twentieth century that attempted to guide readers in choosing books that were both accessible to the average reader and would cultivate culture and character in the individual. Because middlebrow fiction is a median between aesthetic and approachableness, guiding readers in this genre is difficult, and there are always critics arguing for the lack of experimental literature, or the insult made to the reader's intelligence. The most important criterion in any selection is that the authority is trusted, "the personal recommendation—thumbs up, thumbs down—is useful only if we know the thumbprint, the taste of the person making the recommendation" (Pool 122). In exploring a few select texts, this is the premise behind the literary phenomena I will discuss.

* * *

My experiences as a consumer, a bookseller, an intern, and a student have primed me to recognize literary awards and book clubs as among the most widely used recommendation sources today. In both cases, selections are left to those considered professionals in their fields, and simple lists for the reading public result from the conversations in which the selectors engage. In different ways, they strive to narrow the field, considering the intellectual and personal interests of their audience. Literary awards select the "best of" a geographical region, genre, or year, books with masterful writing and engaging subject matter. These selections are more likely to be experimental

and challenging reads. Book clubs select titles whose contents will provide juicy discussion, without guaranteeing grade of literature. Their goal is to appeal to the majority reader, rather than to offer recommendation based solely on a literary standard. It might be generalized that the awards attract the more literary selections, while book clubs favor commercial fiction, yet the titles drawn are two sides of the middlebrow coin.

Literary awards and book clubs are to some extent a means of branding books, a sort of institutionalized word-of-mouth that is typically a boon to sales. The words “Pulitzer Prize” printed on a book’s cover or a bookstore’s “Book Club Selections” display encourages selection, because these are trusted names and organizations. Ultimately, to become a long-standing bestseller, a book is responsible to its readers, but people usually buy before they read. How much of a reader’s decision is an effect of the literature itself—perhaps a passage read in the bookstore or a previous experience with the author’s work—and how much is a result of promotion and publicity is tough to gauge. I thought when I began this project that I could give clear answers to the question of literary awards and book clubs’ justification in guiding America to what she should read. I expected massive differences would immediately appear between the quality of the book club books and the Prize winners. I learned that the middlebrow intentions of making quality literature available to the masses pervade each system’s structure. In reading the four books I have selected, I discovered what they have in common that appeals to the middlebrow reader and the range of situations to which the shared structure can apply. The good news is that all of the books I read maintain very natural ideals of responsibility, love, and family—celebrating literature as the window into humanity that I have, for so many years, adored.

In order to produce my study, I needed to choose a few exemplars of the categories I wanted to explore. Because my personal interests lie in contemporary fiction, I elected four books published over a recent span of six years (1999-2005), two which are among the titles most frequently appearing on popular online reading lists, such as those distributed by Borders and Target, and two that have won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In my research, I discovered that although the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is currently awarded “For distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life” (Topping), initially in 1917, the Prize was given ““for the American novel published during the year which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood”” (Stuckey 7). This progression suggests a “compromise between literary critics and public moralists” that parallels the origins of the BOMC, as well as the goals of contemporary book clubs (Stuckey 10). The book club books represent a lower grade of literature that could be, as Radway described it, more industry and less art. For their mass quantities and frequent releases, I expected them to be less satisfying reads.

I chose female authors primarily because the majority of the American reading public is female. A recent *National Public Radio* article indicates, “Surveys consistently find that women read more books than men, especially fiction” and that actually “the gender gap is at its widest” in terms of fiction, where men represent only twenty percent of readers (Weiner). On the basis of other surveys, a separate article argues, “Unlike the gods of the literary establishment who remain predominantly male—both as writers and critics—their humble readers are overwhelmingly female” (Chaudhry). The “readers” comment I am willing to agree with. The suggestion that writers are predominantly male

might actually depend on which genre and list are concerned. Even in recent decades, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winners list is dominated by men, while book club lists offer more books written by women. For example, the Target “Bookmarked” list has had eighteen books to date—fifteen of them were written by women. In September 2007, the Borders Book Club had a similar ratio; the list comprised thirty-three titles, eighteen of them by female authors. On the other hand, of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winners, even in the last fifty years, only thirty percent have been female.

The authors I chose are a varied group of women. Jodi Picoult, Kim Edwards, Marilynne Robinson, and Jhumpa Lahiri span decades and the globe. Their experiences and styles differ, but they are all bestselling authors of commercial fiction. Picoult’s and Edwards’ books are the book club books. Picoult has published one novel every year for the past decade. She is a well-recognized name and a regular on bestseller lists, a book club staple. Edwards has only published two works, both within the last decade. Her second piece, a novel praised for its accessibility in discussion, experienced an extraordinary leap in sales when it was released in paperback, and it better appealed to “‘smarter, hipper, younger readers’ [...] who frankly prefer the lower price of a paperback” (Rich).

The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction honorees are represented by Robinson and Lahiri. Robinson’s first novel was published in 1980, and received positive reviews, a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction nomination, and immediate association with the feminist movement. Twenty plus years later, with two collections of essays in between, *Gilead* suddenly appeared and won the same Pulitzer award. This novel importantly demonstrated to critics that Robinson’s focus was not explicitly feminism, but rather family relations, a

theme that is often celebrated in book club books. In her second novel, Robinson utilizes strong male characters, and additionally reveals a focus on the soul and spirituality.

Lahiri incorporates her own Indian and American cultures into her work, and I have selected her debut, a collection of short stories, to study as anomalous both in form and in setting. On my high school reading list, Lahiri's book would have been listed under category B, a step above the C-level middlebrow/lowbrow combination, and not quite up to the standards of Robinson's novel, which, for its traditional form and historically American setting, would have boasted A. This range of authors is an indication of the enormity of literary selection available to the contemporary middlebrow reader. Recurring themes and motifs supply argument for the "middlebrow" status' not being a result of critics' distinctions, but of the content of the literature.

In my first double-chapter, I explore the format of the conventional novel, as it manifests itself in contemporary American fiction. The book club books discussed in this section are *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult and *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* by Kim Edwards. Common themes and images, similar family structures and characterizations suggest there is a structure that appeals to the majority of readers, which can be literarily and commercially effective in portraying a range of themes. The author's style is significant in understanding how the format works in different settings and with a variety of subject matter.

My second double-chapter studies Pulitzer Prize for Fiction-winning selections, *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson and *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. These works that have received more culturally esteemed praise further complicate the divisions between literary and commercial fiction within the middlebrow realm. With the idea that

most books come on the fiction scene with a fundamental format and with the same intention—to be sold—this investigation juxtaposes thematic literary analyses of characterization, symbolism, and suspense in these novels to those in the previous chapter, creating a spectrum that gauges literature by modes of merit and potential readership.

A final, personal reflection from a member of the middlebrow audience to which this sort of literature intends to appeal offers an informed, honest reaction to the literature itself, and where it fits in the scheme of contemporary fiction for me as a student, as a reader, and hopefully as an employee in the publishing industry.

CHAPTER ONE: “GO DISCUSS WITH YOUR BOOK CLUB...”:
***MY SISTER’S KEEPER* BY JODI PICOULT AND**
***THE MEMORY KEEPER’S DAUGHTER* BY KIM EDWARDS**

Everyone likes hearing a story—a four-year-old looking for comfort from the monsters in his dark bedroom, a high school student struggling to study medieval history, or an adult winding down after a day in the office. I enjoy reading novels in particular because I love the passive involvement of being told a story that allows me to experience a range of places, situations, people, and emotions. I find myself more interested in science, medicine, law, or history when the information is presented in the context of a story. I also appreciate a story’s ability to reach thoughts and emotions that I otherwise might not actively consider. In an article in *The New York Times*, Jodi Picoult discusses how, through her fiction, she “tries to make her readers think about difficult issues they may never have broached” (Fischler). She explains the value of good fiction: “‘Dickens was probably the first one to do it really well: moral, social, ethical issues that were things that you didn’t really want to bring up but that you would read about and all of a sudden find yourself mulling over,’” (Fischler). The invitation to consider one’s experiences through the context of someone else’s has compelled audiences to become involved in characters’ struggles and journeys for centuries.

Perhaps the most enduring quality of fiction lies in its ability to create a conversation, to communicate thoughts, emotions, and experiences from author to audience. Picoult frames this element of fiction in terms of being a writer, “you never know what your readers think of a book ... you get critical reviews and sales figures, but none of that is the same as knowing you’ve made a person stay up all night reading, or helped them have a good cry, or really touched their life” (Picoult, “Question &

Answer”). Anna Quindlen, author and lifelong reader presents the other side of the experience. “This ability of a book to lessen isolation is important, not simply for personal growth, but for cultural and societal growth as well” (Quindlen 39). She alludes to how book clubs enhance this inherent value of fiction.

But it also seemed to me, listening to members of various book clubs ruminate about what they did and why, that, like so much else, women seem to see reading not only as a solitary activity but as an opportunity for emotional connection, not just to the characters in a novel, but to those others who are reading or have read the same novel themselves. (Quindlen 30)

This is certainly true of me as a reader. I most appreciate fiction when the author’s understanding of humanity provides an emotional and psychological catharsis that speaks to my personal experience. A “good” novel is one that involves me in the conversation, so that I ask myself questions like “What would I do in this situation? How would I feel? How would I react?” When what I relate to is not the science or social norms of the characters’ environment, but their experiences as human beings, the story feels timeless; it stays with me, and I want to recommend the book to everyone I know. Until the recent explosion of creative nonfiction literature, which accesses the same needs of the reader from a celebrity-inspired standpoint, the novel’s ability to satisfy the desire for information, drama, and a personal experience has allowed it to rule my bookshelf and an important sector of the publishing market.

Structuring the Middlebrow Novel

Since the novel emerged in the nineteenth century as a popular literary form, it has come to function as an intellectual interest and as a form of diversion. Today, the floor plan of a bookstore gives insight into how fiction is perceived by publishers and

audiences. Genre fiction is usually printed in “mass market” format, which means a cover with dimensions similar to a photograph, usually 300-400 pages in length. These horror, romance, mystery, and even western editions typically cost between four and six dollars, and are shelved on the short, freestanding bookcases set in the middle of the store. There are rarely “face-outs,” where about six copies of the same book are stacked perpendicularly to expose the front cover to the customer. Rather, books are crammed into the shelves, with their bold-lettered spines toward the customer. While single authors occupy multiple shelves, rarely are more than two or three copies of the same title displayed. These novels might be described as formulaic; characters have little depth, the plot follows a predictable trajectory, and the greatest draw to read is a rush of suspense.

Highbrow and middlebrow are more difficult to distinguish because they both occupy the “Literature” section of the store. Volumes are printed in hardback, paperback, and mass market editions, indicating the broad audiences their publishers hope to reach. Highbrow novels rest primarily in their catalogued sections, emerging only for high school summer reading list displays or to promote an author who has lately been in the news. This category holds the masterpieces of fiction, those with memorable characters, artistic narration, nuanced situations, and expressions that become clichéd slogans.

Middlebrow novels often lie on the front tables as either new paperbacks or paperbacks on sale. Plots follow a general scheme, but the stories incorporate complicated character relationships, imagery, and metaphor. Novels in this category can lean toward “beach books” or tilt toward the cusp of “classic.” Their general appeal is to the reader with a refined literary sense (an educated middle-class woman, but not a professional intellectual), who wants to read something dramatic, topical, and informative.

Realistically, highbrow novels have been set apart for the same reason contemporary middlebrow books are classified as they are today: they have touched readers in meaningful ways throughout cultural and historical eras. With an idea of the literary-commercial spectrum of middlebrow fiction in mind, one might consider which of our contemporary bestsellers will endure as classics.

To some extent, all novels are created equal. However experimental in form, process, or style, there is a certain combination of character, conflict, resolution, dialogue, and description that constitutes a novel. Whether this structure is explored as a foundational format or accepted simply as formula determines placement in one of the three categories, and even within those categories. Academic journals make this distinction clear by studying mainly those on the literary end, while popular publications are candid about the commercial content of the books they review. A self-conscious review of *My Sister's Keeper* in *People Weekly* ends with “Now go discuss with your book club,” confirming the subgenres within middlebrow fiction that are not given special space on bookstore shelves (Sachs). I propose that in contemporary American fiction, which has found a primarily female readership, this general theory can be reduced to a more precise middlebrow model.

In its simplest form, this outline shows that each book finds a family disrupted and watches to see whether the family will survive. The mean between the extremes of highbrow and lowbrow is best exemplified in characterization. Female characters are especially well-developed; mothers, daughters, and sisters play significant roles and have complex relationships. Male characters conform to molds and are somehow removed from the primary action. A topical field is incorporated into the plot, which lets the novel

serve as a sort of social history as well as a story. A subplot provides a more exciting love story than the married couple, and also offers a situation to compare with the main action. Integrated image structures give the reader a chance to flex her literary interpretive muscles and to be engaged in the writing, as well as in the action and characterization.

The structure encourages reader participation by carefully evoking emotional and thoughtful reactions. The reader embraces practical, symbolic, and artistic aspects of the novel to relate them to her own life. Quindlen writes,

[P]erhaps, as a group, women are more interested in deconstructing the emotional underpinnings of other people's problems, of parsing relationships, connections, and emotions, of living emphatically. [...] Perhaps we women are more willing to break the ice. Two things that made this possible most often in many of our lives were intimate friendships and reading. (28)

The rewards of reading are multifaceted but related for the female reader. That reading is commonly considered more intellectually stimulating than watching television attests to its long being respected as a self-improving activity. The "middlebrow" structure appeals to contemporary middle-class women because of its inherent female tendencies, the educational subject matter, and the satisfying journey of interpreting the novel as art.

The foremost element of the middlebrow format is the family, which consists of a married mother and father, their children (between one and three children, of both genders), and an aunt, specifically the mother's sister. Children, particularly daughters, are most directly affected by the family's disruption. Women play more central roles than men, and their relationships draw unique attention; the mother-daughter, sister-sister, and aunt-nephew relationships are well developed threads. In addition, parent-child and pseudo-parent-child relationships are important for furthering themes and asking

questions about how a family functions in times of crisis. This structure allows the typical, middle-class, female, American reader to be personally involved—as a mother, an aunt, a sister, or most certainly, a daughter.

Men's roles are secondary to the main plot, and they enhance issues raised by other elements of the story. Fathers practice professions that involve rescue—medicine, firefighting, even preaching. The father occupies a workplace outside of the home, which attaches yet distances him from the primary action. The son is not the primary focus of the family's crisis, but participates in some sort of rebellion in response to his helplessness for his family. He creates his own distance from the family, and a conflicted relationship with his father eventually finds redemption. Male characters are important to the development of plot, imagery, and other characters, though their roles are more predictable than women's.

A significant element of characters outside of the family is a heterosexual couple who are individually involved in the story's action. They are introduced for the roles of service they play for the family, and then develop their own relationship, equally important to the main trajectory. A love story between these two characters provides a reprieve from what can become the more intense major plot of the novel. The second love story, which is in its courting stages, is carefully juxtaposed to the parents' marriage, which is in the midst of familial crisis and at risk of survival. A secondary love story is also a common trait of popular films and television because audiences, particularly female audiences, appreciate the excitement of a love story and the happy settling in of a new couple as a symbol of hope in the face of disaster. In terms of the novel's structure,

the entertainment is accompanied by a crucial expansion of the family's circle, which invites readers to consider characters' relationships on a more complex level.

Readers are supplied with information about adult characters through flashbacks. Generally told in straightforward chronology, the main narrative begins when the children in the family are young. Although the disruptions focus on them, the pasts of the adults, especially the parents—relationships with now deceased family members, trials and failures of their younger years—are crucial to the context of the story. Flashbacks also provide for integration of American social history, be it war protests, feminism, development of cultural attitudes, or industry. What history the novel incorporates is within the experience of a still-living generation of Americans, keeping it relevant for contemporary readers. With tidbits of social history intertwined schematically and metaphorically, flashbacks clarify relationships and circumstances for the reader of which other characters know little or nothing. Although the chronological shifts can distance the reader from feeling as deeply involved in the action, they intensify the reader's experience, because she is connected to the social experience of the characters, deciphers plot lines on a more sophisticated level, and identifies symbols that make connections between characters.

Setting has a similar potential for imagery and the integration of cultural history. The domestic backdrop of the middlebrow novel provides opportunity for news events, contemporary norms, and social movements to easily make their way into the narrative. The society in which the novel is set, both in the main plotline and in flashbacks, serves the dual purpose of personally connecting readers to the literature and exploring the consequences of historical or contemporary events on the average American home. The

local setting also gives the author more extensive means of constructing imagery. The home is always the central backdrop, symbolizing the family as a unit. Diverting a child to a hospital or another state, while practical for the plot, serves to create a configuration that reflects the family's splintered situation. Locating a father at an office or a firehouse manifests his distance from the family. Time and space are tools to make the middlebrow novel at once more accessible and more interesting to its reader.

In anything other than the post-modern novel, characterization, setting, and imagery are meaningless without a plot. When I chose two books from the most popular titles on book club lists, I knew little of their stories, other than their domestic settings and the coincidence of their medically-related conflicts. What I discovered was a much more finely-tuned trajectory than I had anticipated, and I assume from personal experience that this format is consistent among middlebrow novels. The plot is centered on an incident that is not only an interruption of daily life, but totally disrupts the family's rhythm. The individual most directly affected by the disruption is young, immediately offering the author a coming-of-age thread to echo the plot's progression. A character's maturation story adds another complexity when compared with flashbacks to the parents' youths, especially when the child experiences his or her own romance, and contributes a third dimension to the love stories. The girl around which the trajectory is based has a personal identity, but also serves as an object in the novel, the topic of many conversations and a defining factor in most decisions. Because the family structure is so well defined, it is possible to generalize the reactions of parents, siblings, an aunt, and to some extent, despite the specific nature of the disruption, of the central individual.

More often than not, and especially in the books I have chosen to study, the individual central to the disruption is a daughter/sister; the titles, *My Sister's Keeper* and *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, allude to this connection. Considering the predominantly female readership of the middlebrow novel, this is no accident. The disruption each family faces is a combination of medicine and ethics that challenges familial love, producing the dual intellectual-dramatic hook that distinguishes the middlebrow novel. The father's response is ironically built into his career as a rescuer; he works to save other people's lives because he cannot save his own family. The son sees that he is also powerless to help his family, and acts out less constructively. The aunt, who historically has had her differences with her sister, steps in as a support for the family. The mother, who has always admired her sister's strength, reaches out for support from a female she feels can understand her like no one else can. The intertwining of the characters' stories brings a sympathetic element to the medical and ethical issues around which the novel focuses. The middlebrow novel "asks questions of its characters and its readers," appealing to the educated side of the audience, as well as to the desire to be entertained, yet challenged (Tobin).

Good middlebrow authors understand their readers' expectations for quality in artistic style, in addition to information and entertainment. Because the contemporary American fiction audience is college-educated, or at least very familiar with story structure in television and film, the reader anticipates a level of narrative complexity. Evidence in middlebrow novels is the common use of shifting points of view. As perspective oscillates from one chapter to the next, the reader gains insight into multiple characters' thoughts and is able to interpret each character internally and externally.

Image structures are a second device brought down from highbrow literature, and used to more substantially tell stories. Imagery adds a dimension of complexity that permits the reader to make significant connections between characters and themes. Symbols and metaphors also contribute to the density of the literature and enrich the reader's experience. Middlebrow readers expect much of their novels personally, intellectually, and artistically, and so they take notice of effective literary techniques.

I theorize that the fundamental elements of the novel I have found shared in *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult and *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* by Kim Edwards can be anticipated in most middlebrow literature. This format extends beyond the basic trajectory of conflict and resolution of any story, and incorporates specific characterizations, subject matter, and calculated use of literary devices. The novels described in this section appreciate the sophistication of the middlebrow reader without neglecting the drama and participation most every reader seeks in fiction. Close analysis of these two novels suggests the domestic family model—more specifically, that of a daughter in a nuclear family being affected by a complicated medical situation—is most capable of satisfying the complex demands of the middlebrow reader.

And Then Anna Said to the Lord...: *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult

A daughter is conceived so that her umbilical cord can be used to put her sister's leukemia into remission. Thirteen years later, when the older sister needs a kidney, the younger decides she has had enough of donating platelets, marrow, and blood. She files for medical emancipation, and a trial follows that could mean death for her sister and ruin for her family. Daughter. Medicine. Disruption. Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's*

Keeper has all the features of the middlebrow format, plus the bonus of a well-known, bestselling author.

The novel's cover art—soft blue and pastel pink backgrounds, a review from *People*, “This beautifully crafted novel will grab readers with its stunning topic,” and a photograph of one girl leaning against another, the title stamped across the point where their bodies meet—immediately implies all that the middlebrow novel uses to draw in readers: finely written literature, an appealing subject, and sisterhood. While Picoult herself has confirmed that the novel's appeal is that it “takes a political situation and makes it personal,” critics are not wholly convinced of the methods by which it does so (McClurg, Memmott, and Minzesheimer). The review from *People* continues, “Picoult's style borders on poetic but she stumbles over distracting subplots on the way to a climactic courtroom shocker” (Sachs). A more recent review of another of Picoult's novels generalizes her work as “fast-paced tales of family dysfunction, betrayal and redemption,” that can be “too-neat,” and “grimly entertaining if overplotted” (Hand).

Opinions of Picoult's work vary; another commentary in *USA Today* (articles in literary journals are very few), praises the accessibility of her work. For *My Sister's Keeper*, Picoult “drew on the experience of having a frequently hospitalized child” in a way that “searingly captures how having a sick child can profoundly warp family dynamics” (Donahue). As for “overplotting,” Picoult has said that “her novels are an outgrowth of her own curiosity. She's always asking herself ‘what if’ questions,” the basis of the personal appeal of middlebrow fiction (Donahue). When these questions dominate the structure, perhaps the novel leans more toward the commercial end of the genre.

In considering how the “what-if” questions function, it is important to remember that the emotional and psychological appeals of story-telling do not begin with middlebrow fiction. The title *My Sister’s Keeper* alludes to a Biblical story that intends to be accessible not to religious readers, but to educated readers. In the Book of Genesis, after Cain kills his brother Abel, the Lord asks Cain where his brother is. Cain says he does not know, and asks the Lord, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). The original posing of this question is also in a familial situation and is familiar to most readers as a relevant theme in literature. Most importantly, the allusion is a question itself; this is a perfect starting point for a novel that will play to the reader’s personal experience, having her ask herself, “What would I do? How would I feel?” Picoult is a seasoned veteran in middlebrow literature, and clearly understands her audience. She has mastered the format of the middlebrow novel, and she serves as a fitting example with which to begin this study.

In *My Sister’s Keeper*, Picoult’s eleventh novel, a family of five struggles with decisions about genetics and ethics that they believe could mean life or death for two of their members. The details of the situation and the relationships between characters enrich the plot to bring in themes of identity and dependence, metaphors of combustion and destruction, and challenges to the ideals of unconditional love and familial responsibility. The most fundamental element of the format, the family, appropriately grounds the novel. The Fitzgeralds are Sara, the mother; Brian, the father; Jesse, the oldest child and son; Kate, the first daughter who is battling leukemia; and Anna, the other daughter, who was conceived in large part to save her sister’s life. The novel employs a multiple perspective, first-person narrative, with each member of the family,

plus Campbell, the lawyer, and Julia, the guardian ad litem, narrating in his or her own voice. While Brian's chapters are laced with analogies of stars and constellations and Jesse's riddled with rebellion, female characters—sisters, mothers, and daughters—are afforded the more stylistically complex narrations.

Just as they share blood and marrow, Anna and Kate also share a voice. In the courtroom as well as in the text, only Anna speaks for the majority of the novel. When the motivation behind the lawsuit is revealed as Kate's, it is clear that Anna's voice was as much her sister's as her own. The girls' connection goes beyond sisterhood, even beyond friendship, to construct the two girls as one character. Only after Anna dies does Kate express herself, and in the few pages of the epilogue, she confesses that their bond exceeds a natural connection. Anna has died, but "I think about her kidney working inside me and her blood running through my veins. I take her with me, wherever I go" (Picoult 423). The depth of time in the flashback on the first page, from a time after the story's end to a place before it begins, mirrors Anna and Kate's complexity. The unnamed narrator, who tries to kill her sister because she "didn't seem to exist, except in relation to her," is Kate, not Anna (Picoult 3). Kate and Anna both play the middlebrow daughter role, as two individuals and as one object. Their unique narration expresses their special physical and emotional connections.

Sara's voice is unique because of its sense of time. Contrary to every other character, Sara speaks throughout almost the entire novel in flashback. For her, the story starts not with the lawsuit, but with Kate's diagnosis. Sara's sections have dates as chapter subtitles under her name: *1990* (Picoult 26), *1990-1991* (99), *1996* (163), *1997* (223), and finally *Present Day* (350). Other characters pass through the days of a single

week in the text, while Sara lives through Kate's life, from the age of two, the time when the leukemia, almost a member of the family in itself, entered. Sara's extended flashback divulges a contrast between her perspective and that of the other characters. On *Wednesday*, for instance, Sara recounts the day Anna was born thirteen years before. Immediately after the birth she does not ask about her child, but about the umbilical cord.

The doctor's hand holds her, slides that gorgeous cord free of her neck, delivers her shoulder by shoulder. [...] 'The umbilical cord,' I remind him. 'Be careful.' He cuts it, beautiful blood, and hurries it out of the room to a place where it will be cryogenically preserved until Kate is ready for it. (Picoult 104)

Not only is Sara living in the past, but the memories she relives every day specifically involve Kate. In another section, Kate suffers from mucositis after a bout of chemotherapy, which has caused her to vomit a lot. Sara helps Kate when she struggles to operate the instrument used to clear the phlegm from her mouth and throat. "'I'll do it while you rest,' I promise, and that is how I come to breathe for her" (Picoult 229). As her mother, Sara has spoken for Kate in medical decisions for her whole life. Recognizing that Anna's voice is more closely aligned with Kate's than their mother's, Sara's perspective of the past demonstrates the futility of her wrapping her life around Kate's. These passages suggest that a part of Sara's identity is in Kate, but Kate's identity depends more on Anna's. Picoult's attention to female voices, their dependence on or dominance over each other, characteristically appeals to the middlebrow audience.

Sara's profession contributes to the novel's treatment of women, as well. The middlebrow novel routinely challenges a woman's role as worker, mother, and wife. Sara has explicitly chosen mother over worker, "'I am much better at being a mother than I ever would have been as a lawyer'" (Picoult 27). Sara's close relationship, almost identification with Kate complicates what she had hoped would be a clean break. In the

current situation, in order to be a mother, Sara must be a lawyer. Julia, the guardian at litem for Anna, who functions as a foil to Sara, experiences the converse—her work brings her into a relationship she tries to avoid. In spite of herself, Julia’s relationship with Campbell is rekindled after high school because of the work to which she has devoted herself. She tries to prioritize work over love in the same way that Sara prioritizes her children over her work, but neither woman finds fulfillment in the satisfaction of one over another.

By the end, each woman accepts her need to indulge more than one aspect of her life. For Julia, who functions peripherally, the solution is marrying Campbell. For Sara, a central character, the acquiescence is more complex. She still does not want to act as a lawyer, but it is what she must do as a mother. In her closing argument, while acting as a lawyer, she speaks as a mother, “I turn my back on [Judge DeSalvo], and walk toward my daughter” (Picoult 404). She tells the court, ““A long time ago, I used to be a lawyer. But I’m not one anymore. I am a mother, and what I’ve done for the past eighteen years in that capacity is harder than anything I ever had to do in a courtroom”” (Picoult 406). At the end of the trial, she does not reach out to shake Campbell’s hand, but embraces her husband and daughter. Appealing to contemporary women reconciling work with family life, herself a mother, a wife, and a worker, Picoult neatly writes relationship and family as more important than work, but not exclusively so in both situations.

Picoult conforms to the middlebrow convention of prescribed molds for male family members, while stylistically enhancing the format with image structure. She incorporates a passion for astronomy into Brian’s profession, creating fire imagery that connects him more intimately to his children. As a firefighter, Brian saves other families

from destruction. His additional commentary on stars, astronomy, and fire offers the reader his insightful observations on destructive relationships and natural reactions within the family. His comment on a fire in an incinerator echoes his desperate hope for the family's disruption, "A fire can't burn forever. Eventually, it consumes itself" (Picoult 37). Whatever the disruption, it will eventually pass. Another remark about stars reflects his struggle to understand where to find hope. "Shooting stars are not stars at all. They're just rocks that enter the earth's atmosphere and catch fire under friction. What we wish on, when we see one, is only a trail of debris" (Picoult 200). Brian's tremendous knowledge of when one must be patient with a fire, how stars burn, and the stories of constellations reflects his serious perspective and color his reactions. In recounting the story of Pandora, he shows that "[f]ire and hope are connected [...] Ask any fireman; he'll tell you it's true. Hell. Ask any father" (Picoult 219). Brian remains a flatter character than the women and girls, but the dimension he does have significantly positions him in the story's progression.

Brian's allusions are most pointed when dealing with Anna, who is as much a rescuer as Brian is, and for whom he has a special parental affection. Kate most closely resembles Brian physically, but his unconditional love is stronger for Anna, providing a contrast to Sara's dependency on Kate. "Anna's real name is Andromeda," Brian writes. "It's on her birth certificate, honest to God. The constellation she's named after tells the story of a princess," who is saved from shackles by love (Picoult 43). Brian, who clearly had a commanding role in naming Anna, almost claiming her as his own, continues, "The way I saw it, the story had a happy ending. Who wouldn't want that for a child?" (Picoult 43). His passion for the stars is reflected in his love for his daughter.

This image structure emphasizes the understanding Brian and Anna share and gives Brian, an otherwise predictable character, a story of his own. Brian's comment about fighting fire applies as much to Anna's fighting Kate's leukemia as to his own profession; "The safety of the rescuer is of a higher priority than the safety of the victim. Always" (Picoult 142). In addition to Anna's moving in with Brian at the firehouse, Anna is the also only character (not in flashback) with whom Brian looks at the stars. In these scenes, their conversations are superficially about stars and constellations, but the metaphors go deeper. Brian admits this himself, "Every second, another streak of silver glows: parentheses, exclamation points, commas—a whole grammar made of light, for words too hard to speak" (Picoult 200). His metafictional comment praises the effectiveness of the imagery for complicating the family structure and playing simultaneously to the literary and emotional needs of the reader.

In a similar way, the imagery created by Brian's profession draws a connection to Jesse's rebellion, which takes the form of arson. Earlier, alluding to family problems, Brian explains, "Arson fires are the structures most likely to collapse around you when you're inside fighting them" (Picoult 42). In the same chapter that Brian positively identifies Jesse as the almost serial arsonist in their town, he explains in detail how to create the fire Jesse started (Picoult 327-332). Brian's recipe is intertwined with what is currently happening with his family, underlining the relevance of fire to the Fitzgeralds. When Brian confronts Jesse about his crimes, he realizes that "Jesse isn't all that different from me, choosing fire as his medium, needing to know that he could command at least one uncontrollable thing" (Picoult 331). As Brian suggests elsewhere, fire and hope are connected, and with Jesse, arson means not only destruction, but also reconciliation.

Brian's astronomy references show that his relationships with his children are closer than that with his wife. The star-gazing scenes with Sara are fewer, and do not actually involve stars. Brian's first recounted memory of Sara is her bringing their children to the firehouse to "watch the night rise" (Picoult 45). A later reference to a night alone with Sara emphasizes the growing distance between them. Brian tells Sara he will speak for Anna in court, and she is no longer the woman who told him, "in the darkest crease of the night, that she would love me until the moon lost its footing in the sky" (Picoult 259). His final comment, which effectively completes his active role in the story, is exclusively about Anna and Kate. After Anna has died, he remarks on the identity Anna and Kate shared.

There are stars in the night sky that look brighter than the others, and when you look at them through a telescope you realize you are looking at twins. The two stars rotate around each other, sometimes taking nearly a hundred years to do it. They create so much gravitational pull there's no room around for anything else. You might see a blue star, for example, and realize only later that it has a white dwarf companion—that first one shines so bright, by the time you notice the second one, it's really too late. (Picoult 415-416)

Brian's distance from the home means he can talk about the girls in a way Sara cannot. This image structure is a fascinating element of the novel, because it functions within the middlebrow format while reaching toward the literary end of the spectrum.

The novel's sense of space also contributes to the pull toward sophisticated middlebrow fiction. Even in the most concrete, physical dimension, Julia and Campbell's responsibility for Anna brings them together, while it breaks Sara and Brian apart. Before the trial, Sara and Brian live in the same house. During the trial, Brian spends most of his time living in the fire station. Sara's representing her family in the court removes her from the house as well, taking her even farther away from her husband;

often she is permitted in chambers and other offices while Brian must remain outside in hallways. The setting echoes their schematic separation. Conversely, Julia and Campbell live in two different arenas at the beginning of the novel, but time and again they find themselves in the same buildings, the same rooms—the coffee shop, Campbell’s office, and the courtroom. The novel ends with the optimistic reentry of Brian and Sara into their home and the marriage of Julia and Campbell, which is too easily concluded for some readers. A critic from *The New York Times Book Review* complains that,

This all feels like some awkward combination of a sci-fi novel and a movie on the Lifetime Channel. In short order, the novel becomes a soap opera: characters faced with preposterous circumstances bandy limp clichés; people pull their cars over to the side of the road to have important conversations; and the inevitable climactic courtroom scene serves as everyone’s confessional. (Blum)

The originality of Picoult’s approach is arguable, but the physical positioning of each character is ultimately effective in showing that responsibility for Anna brings Julia and Campbell together, so that they might take care of each other, and losing that responsibility challenges Sara and Brian’s relationship to survive.

Situating Julia and Campbell in the field of law contributes more than a foil for Sara and Brian. Their positions condition the novel’s fundamental question: who is a sister’s keeper? As guardian at litem, Julia is the voice speaking for Anna (and implicitly for Kate) during the trial. Campbell takes that role after the verdict, officially donating Anna’s kidney to Kate. “‘I have power of attorney for Anna,’ he explains, ‘not her parents’” (Picoult 416). Their relationships to Anna give them the legal decision-making power over her body throughout the majority of the novel; almost all along they have been Anna’s keepers. The structures of law incorporated into the story effectively remove that decision-making from Sara and Brian, who would typically be their

daughter's keeper. Characterizations, plot trajectory, and circumstances of time and space congeal into the thematic posture of familial responsibility that supplies the psychological and emotional drama of the reader's experience.

The role of Anna's keeper is challenged for each character throughout the novel, and at no point is one person entirely responsible for her. Sara closes her argument in court with the explanation that, "nobody ever really makes decisions entirely by themselves, not even if a judge gives them the right to do so" (Picoult 406). The accident caused by an unnamed driver at the end confirms the limitations of "keeping," or taking care of others. Judge DeSalvo orders the emancipation papers to be signed and creates the timing for the accident; Campbell agrees to donate Anna's organs; Sara and Brian must accept Kate's procedures. Brian feels his limitations as profoundly as anyone else. "I became a firefighter because I wanted to save people," he says, "But I should have been more specific. I should have named names" (Picoult 147).

The "keeper's" limitations are depicted most clearly at the novel's conclusion, when the characters stand most closely side by side. The final day, *Thursday*, finds all the characters physically in the same setting for the first time. Everyone gathers in the courtroom, and even Sara functions in the present day. The physical proximity of the characters echoes the looming imminence of the verdict and their lack of control in it. Despite the different voices, even different fonts, with which each character has told his or her own story, on this day, each character begins with the same words: "It's raining." The rain is schematically significant as the cause of the accident that kills Anna, but is first symbolically important because rain blurs one's view, and this day confronts a tough decision without a clear answer.

Each character interprets the rain in a way that foreshadows what will happen to him or her. The now shorter sections pick up the novel's pace, but continue to utilize the multiple points of view that give each character a voice. Campbell is the first to notice the rain, and he remembers how his father's windshield wipers were inconsistent, "so that the world went runny on my side of the glass for whole blocks of time" (Picoult 399). Today Campbell finds the confidence his father refused him as a child, and faces a turning point for what has been building up in him from even before the beginning of the novel. For Jesse the rain is a crossroads as well; after another failed attempt to be struck by lightning, he stands up and decides to find a new way to live. Rain means disastrous cycles to Anna; she thinks of "dams and flash floods, arks" (Picoult 402). Her prophetic remark that water is always moving is completed in Kate's note in the epilogue that Anna is always with her. Brian remembers the overcast sky the night Anna was born, "There were no stars that night, what with all the rain clouds" (Picoult 403). Today, because of the rain, his star, his Andromeda, will not sparkle any longer either. The rain is seen through the window for Sara, who is already in the courtroom, giving her closing argument. She continues to struggle as mother and lawyer. As she concludes her statement and the rain is still falling. "I wonder if it will ever let up," she thinks (Picoult 406). Rain contrasts with the fire and star imagery that dominates the novel, foretelling an event that will extinguish everyone's vision of what is right, blurring what should have happened, jolting the reader's emotional expectations.

A result of the rain, Anna's death complicates the question of being someone's keeper. An article in *The Washington Post* limits the challenges left at the novel's end to medical ethics: "Can a child born to save another ever really be free? Babies selected for

certain characteristics, like Anna, are predestined to be tied indefinitely to the circumstances of their birth, and to their parents and their siblings in need. Aren't they?" (Arie). That reviewer continues, "Unfortunately, the characters themselves are overwhelmed by the galloping pace. Indeed, it is not Anna, her parents, or even Campbell, but a bittersweet turn of events—one last plot twist, a surprise ending—that solves the dilemma at hand" (Arie). A more intimate look at how Anna presents her dilemma speaks to the depth Picoult has consciously injected into the title and the family dynamic. In a conversation with Campbell, Anna wonders, "What if Kate wanted to die, so that I could live? What if after all these years of saving Kate, she was only trying to do the same for me?" (Picoult 391). Anna remembers when Kate saved her from being hit by a car in her baby walker. "I remember it as the time she saved me, instead of the other way around" (Picoult 306). If Anna is right that "Kate's death would be the worst thing that's ever happen to me...and also the best," then it is unclear how anyone can definitively measure her responsibility toward and dependence on another (Picoult 391). In her own words, Anna asks, "If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone?" (Picoult 138). Kate answers Anna's question; "I take her with me, wherever I go" (Picoult 423).

The girls give and take from each other as if they were one person. Perhaps this is a New Testament answer to the Old Testament question the book has posed from the start, namely, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Even with the complicated circumstances and strained relationships, the love of the family ultimately endures. Picoult's inspiration of maternal love, her conviction that the love between a mother and a child "beyond doubt is true" manifests itself also as sisterly love in this novel ("Jodi

Picoult Q&A”). Anna’s last words to Campbell when he asks her what she’d like to be in ten years solidify this paradoxically optimistic theme: “Only one thing’s a constant. ‘Ten years from now,’ I say, ‘I’d like to be Kate’s sister’” (Picoult 412).

Leaning toward Literary: *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* by Kim Edwards

In a bookstore, Kim Edwards’ novel *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* shares the same two locations as Picoult’s: both the “Literature” with a capital “L” section and the paperback fiction table in the front entryway, intended to be most directly in customers’ view. Embodying the genre-straddle of middlebrow fiction, Edwards’ novel is “popular” fiction, but it is good fiction. Readers can indulge their literary senses, while relating to characters and situations enough to discuss in meaningful conversation with peer readers. What sets this novel apart, what makes it particularly relevant to a study on the book club books of the twenty-first century, is that it gained special notice by booksellers and customers alike only after it was published in paperback.

An article printed in *The New York Times* just six weeks after the paperback reprint praises the novel while justifying the second run’s increase in sales. “With the ethical dilemma and family drama at its heart, *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* is appealing to readers who want a literary page turner and something to discuss in their reading groups” (Rich). One book group reader commented, “‘It raised a lot of issues about how you would have reacted in the same situation. I think it’s an incredible discussion book’” (Rich). Contrary to those of *My Sister’s Keeper*, the reviews of Edwards’ novel generally focus on the craft of the language, rather than the topic. A review even from the novel’s first run in hardback admits its sub-classification, but lauds

its leaning toward the literary end of middlebrow fiction, “Edwards’ novel is as much a page-turner as any airport novel, but her prose takes on the cadence of poetry as she vividly describes the landscapes her characters inhabit and the burdens they carry” (Potts). Even Jodi Picoult recognizes that *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* is more satisfying for its literary appeal than for its subject matter. Printed on the back cover, a blurb from Picoult reads, “Kim Edwards has created a tale of regret and redemption, of honest emotion, of characters haunted by their past. Crafted with language so lovely you have to reread the passages just to be captivated all over again...this is simply a beautiful book.”

While the novel was declared a “#1 *New York Times* Bestseller,” before its publication, Edwards was not. The paperback edition of *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter* features acclaim from popular middlebrow author Sue Monk Kidd, “author of *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*,” in addition to the quote from Picoult. Approval from other trusted authors promise this novel will deliver according to the standards the middlebrow format demands. Soft pink letters stamp out the title, with the words “a novel”—just like on the cover of *My Sister’s Keeper*—below an image of a little girl’s dress. Similar titles and feminine images on the covers appeal to middlebrow audiences, especially to their emotional reasons for reading. The title does not allude to a well-known story, but to the dominant symbol of the camera throughout the novel, which at first glance is only cryptic, encouraging potential readers to at least flip the book over and read the summary on the back cover. Already, before a page is turned, the reader has the book in hand, and is engaged with the story to be told. A flip through the pages shows that this, like Picoult’s novel, contains an “Acknowledgements” section, a clue to the outside research necessary to the intellectual aspect of a middlebrow novel, and a reading

guide, indicative of the personal experience which this book should stimulate. Even before the first sentence, Edwards' novel can be positioned in the midst of contemporary American middlebrow fiction, confident in the powers of "word of mouth and book clubs" that have helped it to "ignite in paperback, selling exponentially larger quantities" than it did in hardback (Rich).

The Memory Keeper's Daughter is a prime example of the combination of art and industry in middlebrow fiction. In the midst of a 1964 snowstorm, David must help his wife, Norah, deliver their baby. A healthy boy is born, but David realizes that the birth is not over; Norah was unknowingly pregnant with twins. The second child is a girl, and David immediately recognizes that she has Down syndrome. While Norah and baby Paul sleep, David asks his nurse, Caroline, to take the girl to an institution. Caroline cannot bear to leave the baby at the home, so she raises Phoebe on her own. In parallel chapters, Caroline struggles to raise Phoebe and raise awareness for children with Down syndrome and their families, while Norah struggles with the loss of her daughter, whom David tells her has died. David never reveals his secret, seeking consolation instead in photography, "a poignant attempt to freeze perfect moments and crop life just as he wants it" (Charles). The emotional impact of the story has been described as such: "This tragedy of a man who thinks he can control how lives are redirected is as moving as the story of his nurse, who knows that her love can bless a damaged life. In the end, it's not just that David made a mistake in a moment of crisis; it's that he never realized that parenthood is an infinite series of opportunities for redemption" (Charles).

The Memory Keeper's Daughter's strength lies more in the writing than in the research, but it nonetheless shares many thematic and structural characteristics with *My*

Sister's Keeper: a medical disruption centered on a female child causes repercussions through a structured family; the story is told through multiple points of view; and it combines the emotional, intellectual, and artistic experience that middlebrow readers seek in a novel. Appealing to the more literary end of her genre, Edwards schematically sets the novel deeper in the past, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and uses that to chronicle the reactions and long-term consequences of a decision made early in the text. Because the medical disruption is Down syndrome, which is socially and ethically better understood today than it was in the 1960s, the content of the novel is not focused on whether David's decision to send Phoebe away was wrong, but rather how that unforgivable decision has affected his family's development. Edwards complicates the structure with two main plotlines and characterizations that blur the boundaries of the mother and the child. The rescuer-metaphorical father has a back story of his own familial disruption, which defines and solidifies his place outside of the mother-child relationships. As the other characters poetically mature around him, symbols echo from the first chapter into motifs that reach to the last. Edwards attends to each facet of the conventional novel's structure, but allows American social history and the medical disruption to take a backseat to symbolism and lyrical narrative.

David's hobby provides the extended metaphor that links the intellectual experience with the emotional and psychological expectations of the middlebrow reader. David functions as both powerless father and desperate doctor-rescuer at the beginning of the novel. His developing interest in photography creates an image structure similar to Brian's astronomy. In a bitter remembrance of his father, Paul later relates, "Camera, his father told him, came from the French *chamber*, room. To be *in camera* was to operate in

secret. This was what his father had believed: that each person was an isolated universe” (Edwards 381). Photography separates the viewer from the subject, and captures moments, allowing them to be looked back upon over time. As much as is the camera Norah gives him for an anniversary present, David himself is the “memory keeper,” (Edwards 88). David’s secret, what isolates him from his family, is the device used to juxtapose Caroline and Norah as mothers and as women, viewing similar experiences in different lights. The momentum that builds from this careful arrangement provides for meaningful female relationships and integration of American social history. Structurally, the novel is concerned with the resolution to David’s grief, but holistically, this novel is as interested in familial responsibility as Picoult’s.

Edwards’ concept of time is thematically relevant to the photography motif and the idea of a “keeper” of memories. The novel is structured chronologically, with the two families’ stories overlapping each other over three decades. The first chapter sets the scene for the memory that is the source of the disruption. Even the first chapter, this first memory, is rife with recollections: David remembers meeting Norah in the department store lingerie section, “one gray November Saturday while he was buying ties” (Edwards 5), the “lilacs outside the window of the student rooms he’d once occupied in Pittsburgh” (Edwards 5), and even Norah’s “perfect script” from the third grade, with which she wrote her name and phone number for him that day (Edwards 6). As a clue to the complexity of the memories David keeps, there is also mention of the day he woke in his office to find Caroline gazing at him, “it was an intimacy of such magnitude that he was motionless, transfixed” (Edwards 12). Like a camera holding images in secret, David alternates holding each image up to the light, but keeps both pictures for himself.

The memories in the first chapter are divulged from David's perspective, permitting him power to choose which memories become secrets kept from other characters, even from himself. Only intermittently does David think of his family, "The house that was his but empty now, deserted when his sister died and his parents moved away, the rooms his mother had scrubbed to a dull gleam abandoned, filled only with the rustlings of squirrels and mice" (Edwards 12). Early in the narrative, the reader learns that David keeps the memory of his sister from everyone in his adult life. It is not surprising, then, when he attempts to keep his own supposedly flawed daughter from the family. Because he has been hiding his grief even from himself, he cannot see the inevitable fallout of his decision. The narrative's measured withholding and confession of information through David is tellingly incorporated into an image of snow.

Later, when he considered this night—and he would think of it often, in the months and years to come: the turning point of his life, the moments around which everything else would always gather—what he remembered was the silence in the room and the snow falling steadily outside. (Edwards 17)

The nuanced anticipation of the "moments around which everything else would always gather" is less harsh than the suspense in *My Sister's Keeper*, and allows a story that hinges on David's decisions to be more compellingly engaged with Norah and Paul, Caroline and Phoebe.

Multiple points of view contribute to the story's thematic and narrative complexity. In the first chapter, the third-person narration dips into David's, Norah's, and Caroline's psyches, but every subsequent chapter focuses on either David, Norah, Paul, or Caroline, emphasizing the distance that has developed between each set of characters. (Similar to Kate in *My Sister's Keeper*, who only shares her voice in the epilogue, Phoebe does not have a voice in the novel.) Immediately, readers witness

Norah and David's love and excitement turning stale after their children's birth; their situation directly parallels Sara and Brian's. Contrary to the confines of the structure, Caroline's voice poses her as an anomalous element: while she is a caretaker of a child and a part of the secondary love story like Julia, her voice gains equal standing with Norah's and David's. Her man, Al, is not afforded the same voice as Campbell, and the residual narrative weight shifts to Caroline. Caroline has substantial relationships with David and Norah, plus the position, even in a maternal role, to be a voice for Phoebe—a kind of “keeper” that David and Norah cannot be. The concurrence of her sections with Norah's also explores the similarities in Paul and Phoebe—their dark hair, an allergy to bees, and an affinity for music.

Edwards positions Norah's coping in this historical era to chronicle the psychology of grief in mid-century, and successfully relates the human experience of loss. David's decision to tell her Phoebe is dead grounds Norah's search for fulfillment. It is a situation with which few readers can immediately associate, but the consolation Norah seeks first in a memorial for Phoebe, then through alcohol, then in work at a travel agency, and eventually with other men speaks to any experience of loss and longing. Even when David dies, Norah needs things to do, “[She] moved through the tasks in a protective cloud of numb efficiency” (Edwards 327). With the light of her memory on the scene, Norah's perspective on the days after the children's birth identifies the social norms of her contemporary America. David distracts Norah from seeing Phoebe's body by reminding her of their healthy son. “‘I know,’ she said, because it was 1964 and he was her husband and she had always deferred to him completely” (Edwards 38). The feeling “that she was leaving behind some essential part of herself” piles up like the snow

gathering in David's memory, creating barriers between Norah and the world around her (Edwards 38). When she cannot even talk about Phoebe with a group of women from her church, "the silence became a lake, an ocean, where they all might drown" (Edwards 46). The forces of snow and water create a scheme of rhythmic, overpowering metaphors that represent the silence and lack of communication Norah suffers.

The explicit explanation for what Norah experiences is told retrospectively, "Depression—years later she would understand the murky light she lived in—but no one talked about this in 1965. No one even considered it. Certainly not for Norah, who had her house, her baby, her doctor husband. She was supposed to be content" (Edwards 76). Through the lens of memory, what could not be identified in the moment is revealed from a distance. That distance is expressed in society as well as over a period of time, as demonstrated by a protest at the university, echoing Norah's taking a job. "Her restlessness and longing seemed answered by this moment, and she fell into the current of moving people" (Edwards 130). Norah's character is simultaneously a measure of her own struggle and the nation's developing social understanding of itself. The silence that her individuality faces becomes oppressive, and her comfort ultimately comes from the words of a woman comparable to herself, that is, through Caroline's confession.

As another primary female figure, Caroline challenges the roles of mother, wife, and worker. Caroline, for purposes of analysis, can be labeled Phoebe's mother. Though she does not physically bear Phoebe, she is immediately involved in Norah's labor, even more than David is involved as a father. "It was the nurse who held her hand as she pushed," and it is the nurse who Norah remembers years after, whose blue eyes make her feel "as if something had been settled between them" (Edwards 15, 366). Both mothers

give special care to their new babies. From the first days of being home with their children, there is a clear distinction between the lives Caroline and Norah are to lead as mothers. While Norah has the neat life and tidy home appropriate for a mother with a doctor husband and a healthy baby boy, Caroline's decision to raise Phoebe, one that few people in her time find acceptable, turns her world upside down. She gives up all of herself for Phoebe when she brings the baby home for the first time. In what was an articulately ordered apartment, Caroline "pulled a drawer from her dresser and dumped its neat contents in a pile on the floor" to make a bed for Phoebe (Edwards 58). By researching Down syndrome, developing support groups, and fighting for mainstreaming disabled children in public schools, Caroline has a similar but more dominant role in Phoebe's life than Julia's role in Anna's. Caroline is a guardian for Phoebe, a foil for Norah, and a means of integrating the social attitudes of America in the 1960s and 1970s.

In terms of the mother-worker dilemma, the circumstances for Norah and Caroline function similarly to those of Sara and Julia. Responsibility for Phoebe brings Caroline to Al, the truck driver who helped her when her car stalled the first night with Phoebe, as Anna brings Julia back to Campbell. The tensions over Phoebe challenge Norah's marriage as Anna's situation does Sara's. The concept of memory and the connection to David, though, bring Edwards' novel to a different kind of conclusion. When Caroline tells Norah that Phoebe did not die, as David said she did, "Norah felt caught in the moment as she had been all those years ago, holding on to that gaze as the known world shifted around her" (Edwards 368). Caroline's words have such weight for Norah, that when Norah tells Paul about Phoebe, her words are written indirectly, not as dialogue. "His sister, she told him calmly, had not died at birth after all. She'd been born

with Down syndrome, and his father had asked Caroline Gill to take her to a home in Louisville” (Edwards 380). Caroline is the first character to be referred to with a proper name, besides Paul and Phoebe, who are named in the first chapter. Here she is called by her full name, emphasizing the role she has played as a public and personal figure, pulling together various facets of the middlebrow novel into a strong female character both internal and external to the story’s action. Caroline is integral to the emotional impact and the intellectual discussion of the novel. The confession, which has been anticipated since the end of the very first scene, is something only Caroline could do. Just as only she could raise Phoebe, only she could speak for Phoebe, it is only Caroline who can tell Norah the truth about her, or perhaps, their, daughter.

Paul’s multi-faceted role as the “other” child in the family contributes more directly to the familial responsibility on which the novel is based. Like Jesse who rebels against his family because he feels helpless, Paul causes problems at home, messing up his father’s darkroom when he smokes pot with some friends, and even running away from home. Yet Paul must play Anna’s role as well, and even as he reconciles with his father, he must attempt to stake a claim of responsibility for his sister. In the same way that Anna and Julia have more responsibility for Kate than Sara does in *My Sister’s Keeper*, Paul and Caroline play the “keeper” role that Norah cannot. Like Anna for Kate, or even Kate for Anna, Paul speaks with a new voice for Phoebe at the end of the novel. Before Phoebe, “He’d never even met a retarded person, and he found that all the images he had were negative,” but when he interacts with her, he finds the experience different than his expectations (Edwards 383). As they talk, Paul becomes “used to her speech, and the more he talked to Phoebe, the more she was simply herself, impossible to label”

(Edwards 389). Finally Paul begins to have a relationship with his sister; he is able to act on the responsibility for her that he has been unknowingly craving all his life.

David's secrets draw a direct parallel from this novel's title to Picoult's. The theme of a natural desire, even need, for responsibility and an active role in one's family is evident in both stories, no matter how strictly they abide by the structure. Over three decades when people want to think they are individuals, there is a yearning for responsibility that approaches characters like Norah and David who do not even know what is missing. The titles *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* and *My Sister's Keeper* suggest the urgency of "keeping" our families, of being responsible for one another. This idea reaches back to Cain and Abel, making this story essentially one of the oldest ever told, and clearly one that remains relevant. For me, Edwards' novel had more emotional resonance and depth than Picoult's because of its stylistic treatment of suspense and scrambling of character roles. In essence, the moral of both stories is that the family's duty to care for one another is a fundamental, though perhaps neglected, facet of the way we as human beings understand ourselves.

CHAPTER TWO: “AND THE PRIZE FOR FICTION GOES TO...”:
***GILEAD* BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON AND**
***INTERPRETER OF MALADIES* BY JHUMPA LAHIRI**

Recognition as a Pulitzer Prize winner translates a book that originally appealed to the majority audience into a much smaller category of the “best” fiction published each year, as determined by a professional committee. Book club books have license to span the reaches of literary and commercial fiction, but these books should represent the most extreme literary end of the spectrum. Studying these books will help to tease out the qualities that distinguish “great” literature and lean toward highbrow, from those that indulge the commercial aspects of contemporary fiction.

My initial reads of the Pulitzer Prize-winning books told me that my reactions to Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* were more profound than my reactions to Picoult’s and Edward’s novels. Robinson’s writing, imagery, and aphoristic phrasing had me recommending her novel to everyone I encountered who asked about books. I reacted more emotionally to Lahiri’s short stories than to almost anything I have ever read. Apart from my personal reactions, I was also impressed by a common journey theme and the authors’ masterful language that transformed ordinary events and objects into extraordinary experiences. I recognize that there are distinct differences in the Pulitzer Prize-winning books; they are more experimental in voice and format than conventional middlebrow novels. *Gilead* is told from a single male perspective, rather than multiple points of view. *Interpreter of Maladies* is not even a novel, but rather a collection of short stories. My interest is in how that experimentation is successful, and what endures about the format in this category that has brought all four of these books to bestseller status.

Blessing John Ames: *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson is the story of a line of ministers named John Ames, set in Iowa in 1956 and stretching back over a hundred years. The novel relates three generations' experiences before, during, and after the American Civil War, with a thematic focus on reconciliation between fathers and sons. John Ames the narrator writes the text of *Gilead* as a letter to his seven-year-old son, whose name is never mentioned, but may well continue in the family's tradition. Ames is seventy-six years old, and has been diagnosed with a heart condition called "'angina pectoris,'" which he thinks "has a theological sound" (Robinson 4). He writes in order to "set something by" for his son, to leave a family history, and tell him all the things he would have liked to say, if he had had the chance (Robinson 4). The parallels in the lineage of the narrator's father and grandfather are wrapped up in the history of Bleeding Kansas, a series of violent events just before the outbreak of the Civil War, and explained in the context of a nation on the cusp of the civil rights movement. Their history resonates in the various images of family that have been Ames' own throughout his life. The "suspensions of chronology" create a sense of time that "sometimes seems to fold inward," pushing "further toward revelation: all time is one time" (Acocella).

Ames believes that certain texts, including his own, are sacred. Within his letter, Ames mentions sermons, the Bible, Ludwig Feuerbach (an atheist who wrote about religion, and Christianity in particular), and poets like George Herbert and John Donne. He even mentions slipping a note from his grandfather into his Bible to keep it (Robinson 85). As Ames converses with these authors and his reader, the novel "teaches us how to

read it, suggests how we might slow down to walk at its own processional pace, and how we might learn to coddle its many fine details” (Wood).

Ames’ text is more conscious of being written than being read. Indulging Ames’ “quietly meditative voice [...] enforc[ing] a vision of the miraculous ordinary,” Robinson allows the preacher to set the pace of tension and revelation (Hubbard). Ames is reluctant to speak about his godson Jack for a considerable portion of the novel. When writing about Jack, especially in connection with his own wife and child, Ames often stops writing to pray or to sleep and avoid agitating his heart. Eventually he does confront Jack, and as much as the text was intended for his son, it ultimately serves as healing for Ames. Near the end of the novel, he reflects on what the letter has become.

I have been looking through these pages, and I realize that for some time I have mainly been worrying to myself, when my intention from the beginning was to speak to you. I meant to leave you a reasonably candid testament to my better self, and it seems to me now that what you must see here is just an old man struggling with the difficulty of understanding what it is he’s struggling with. (Robinson 202)

Ames struggles with the relationship between man and the divine, with what it means to be a man, a father, and a preacher. Early in the novel, he writes, “For me, writing has always felt like praying, even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough” (Robinson 19). Preaching and praying are his family’s traditions; they are what he knows. He prays and he writes “in the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting through my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true” (Robinson 19). His honest efforts to relate his family’s history and his own convictions complete exactly the task he intends for himself, and a well-developed image of the man John Ames emerges.

The name “John Ames” indicates a common lineage of many men in the novel, drawing them together as the generations of one family, each with a unique experience of

Christianity. The narrator's grandfather's Christianity hinged on an intimate relationship with Jesus that left him filled with sadness. In the mid-1800s, when the United States was determining whether Kansas should enter the union as a free or a slave state, he received a tangible vision of Jesus, "holding out His arms to him, which were bound in chains" (Robinson 49). That vision encouraged him to move his family from Maine to Gilead, Iowa, and to fight for abolition in Kansas. Ames' grandfather believed in the righteousness of his battle, and preached that way in his church.

The narrator's father never experienced such visions, and his theology was one of an almost Quaker peace, reflective, non-confrontational, and focused on a Biblical image of Jesus. Ames, Jr. could not attribute the vigor of his father's Christianity to Christ, and eventually told him that preaching his community into war "has *nothing* to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing" (Robinson 85). Despite their differences as men and as preachers, the narrator remembers his father's grief, "that the last words he said to his father were very angry words and there could never be any reconciliation between them in this life" (Robinson 10). An article noting John Edwards's theology in Robinson's novel remarks that "Robinson destabilizes the meaning of cultural history by presenting it, not as objectively definable factual heritage existing 'in history,' but as disparate images, non-chronologically remembered, within the mind of a fictional dying man" (Mensch 222). Thematically, American history mirrors the desire for reconciliation between fathers and sons that is early embedded in the inheritance of Ames the narrator.

The narrator's theology is "richer and altogether more human and forgiving" than his father's and his grandfather's (Klinkenborg). He admires his grandfather, and understands his father, but remains critical of his own courage and strength. "John

Ames's faith is crowned with doubt, and his doubt is crowned with faith" (Klinkenborg). Ames recognizes that his grandfather "was a saint of some kind," and he can easily imagine Jesus befriending his grandfather, even sharing a meal with him (Robinson 31). "I can't say the same for myself. I doubt I'd ever have had the strength for it," Ames writes (Robinson 30). His theology is "[n]ot the acceptance of one's plight—a submissive suffering under the hand of circumstance—but an acceptance of the complexity, the subtlety of human character and human yearning seen in a longer light than any one of us can know" (Klinkenborg). Similarly, when Ames attempted to deliver a sermon that criticized war the way his father did, he could not present it: "I seemed ridiculous to myself for imagining I could thunder from the pulpit in those circumstances, and I dropped that sermon in the stove" (Robinson 43). Without the brazen courage his father and grandfather possessed, Ames's humble theology is revealed at the end of his letter, "To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded," and he speaks as much of himself as he does of Gilead (Robinson 246).

Mirroring the generations of Ames men are the manifestations of the narrator's family, each challenging the continuance of the family name. The first was his childhood sweetheart, Louisa and their child, Rebecca, both of whom died at the baby's birth. With this daughter, the John Ames lineage breaks. The name sees a different incarnation in the second version of Ames' family. Ames' best friend Boughton surprised him by naming one of his children John Ames Boughton, calling him Jack, and offering Ames another chance at fatherhood through a godson. Although Ames feels a great personal and spiritual responsibility to Jack, he rejects his namesake because of the boy's meanness and lack of spirituality. The woman to whom John Ames is currently married, Lila, is a

kind of miracle to Ames, as is their son. The boy is still very young, but holds the promise of continuing the family's tradition and taking his father's place in the world.

Ames' position as a minister in mid-twentieth century Iowa requires that he would be more comfortable talking with and about men, than with and about women. Subtly, Ames tells how Rebecca, Lila, and another woman from Jack's past have played almost overlapping roles in his family's history. When Lila arrives in Ames' life, she is approximately the age Rebecca would have been, had she lived. She is also near the age of the girl with whom Jack fathered a child when he was in college. Jack did not acknowledge the baby, and she died when she was three years old. Try as he might to tell himself, "That one man should just squander his fatherhood as if it were nothing—well, that does not mean that the second man has transgressed the first," Ames cannot escape his anger toward Jack (Robinson 164). He has difficulty seeing Jack interact with Lila and his son. The dignity and significance Ames draws to women and children by speaking of them so delicately justifies the ground on which a spiritual battle is waged through the rest of the novel.

From the start, Ames writes that "There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that. A lot of malice and dread and guilt, and so much loneliness, where you wouldn't really expect to find it, either" (Robinson 6). Ames struggles throughout the novel to correct what he imagines was his greatest transgression. When Ames learned Jack would be named after him during the child's christening, he was shocked.

As it was, my heart froze in me, and I thought, This is *not* my child—which I truly had never thought of any child before. [...] I have thought from time to time that the child felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him. (Robinson 188)

As a father and a preacher, he feels a terrible grief for having given the child the sacrament with covetise, which he defines as “not so much desiring someone else’s virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it” (Robinson 188). The narrator does not have the social or doctrinal religion of his fathers. Rather, Ames understands sin as a rejection of God’s grace in ordinary things like love, family, and children. As much as Ames sees evil in Jack’s disrespect for his family both as a child and as a father, he also recognizes evil in his own inability to love Jack as unconditionally as his Christianity and fatherhood require.

A Protestant preacher, Ames believes strongly in baptism, which in the traditional sense means the cleansing of either original sin or of the tendency to sin, depending on the strain of Christianity. Because Ames rarely uses Christ-centered language, the death and resurrection imagery of baptism represent for him the washing away of the struggle of being human, which more traditional theologians would name sin, in exchange for the great mystery of God’s presence in a person. “Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don’t have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see” (Robinson 245). This “willingness to see” is faith, and Ames finds the greatest encouragement for his faith in the simple act of baptism. Baptism, as a kind of blessing, “doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it [...] The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time” (Robinson 23). Divinity expressed through humanity drives Ames’ faith both in his love for all that is ordinary and in his trouble with Jack.

Ames’ theology pivots on God’s constant presence in ordinary things. For him, holiness is the first priority; all that is created in the world is a means of expressing the

abundant sacredness in life. Ames sees a young couple on his way to church one morning. The young man tugs on the branch of a wet tree, causing “a storm of luminous water [to come] pouring down on the two of them” (Robinson 27). Remembering their playful reactions, he remarks that, “it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash” (Robinson 28). In another moment, Ames reflects on the sprinkler, “a magnificent invention because it exposes raindrops to sunshine” (Robinson 63). Under the shimmering shower of the water, his son and his friend Tobias “are dancing around in your iridescent little downpour, whooping and stomping as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water” (Robinson 63). Ames’ meditations on water reflect his faith. He writes, “it seems to me transformations just that abrupt do occur in this life, and they occur unsought and unawaited, and they beggar your hopes and your deserving” (Robinson 203). Water is natural, yet profound in its symbolism for baptism, and thus functions as a bridge between humanity and divinity.

Ames describes his Congregational church’s baptism as a brief touching of water to the brow. He explains, “the water just heightens the touch of the pastor’s hand on the sweet bones of the head, sort of like making an electrical connection” (Robinson 63). Each time Ames baptizes, he is “comprehended in the experience more fully, having seen more of life, knowing better what it means to affirm the sacredness of the human creature” (Robinson 91). Ames recognizes the experience of grace in the tears of those he baptizes; the two infants he baptized the day he first saw Lila both “wept when I touched the water to their heads the first time,” and “[t]he tears ran down [Lila’s] face”

when Ames baptized her later (Robinson 21). The water on these hands and faces acknowledges “the sacredness of the human creature” (Robinson 91).

Somehow, the signal of God’s presence was absent when Ames baptized Jack Boughton, “I was so distracted by my own miserable thoughts that I didn’t feel that sacredness under my hand that I always so feel, that sense that the infant is blessing me” (Robinson 189). From that moment, their souls seem to have diverged. The irritations Jack consistently causes Ames throughout his life—“I hesitate to call it devilment, but it certainly does make me uncomfortable, and I’m fairly sure that is what he intends”—challenge Ames’ simple understanding of grace (Robinson 123). Ames’ greatest fear is how even as a grown man, Jack “makes such a point of seeing right through me” (Robinson 123). A sort of alter ego lives in Jack and causes Ames fear, agitating his heart and manifesting itself as the “theological sound” behind his “angina pectoris”—which is quite literally an obstruction to the heart.

Ames reflects on Calvin’s *Institute of Christian Worship*, “where it says the image of the Lord in anyone is much more than reason enough to love him” (Robinson 189). Although Ames has “probably preached on that a hundred times,” he admits that he struggles “whenever I set the true gravity of sin over against the free grace of forgiveness” (Robinson 189). Jack’s sins were always met with forgiveness from his family, but that grace caused no change in his intentions. In a deep meditation, Ames writes, “I wish I could put my hand on [Jack’s] brow and calm away all the guilt and regret that is exaggerated or misplaced, or beyond rectification in the terms of this world. Then I could see what I’m actually dealing with” (Robinson 201). Ames’ reluctant desire to confront and forgive Jack’s “devilish” nature shifts the focus of the novel, and “[f]ar

from being the placid reminiscence he had planned, [Ames'] book becomes a frantic, day-to-day diary, indeed a suspense novel, in which the Old Testament and the New fight it out in his soul one more time" (Acocella).

Jack and Ames have their climactic conversation in the church, in the only section of the novel separated from the rest by a page break. Ames learns that Jack has come back to Gilead to see if he could bring his family, a black wife and biracial son there. The feeble state of his own father has convinced him that would be disastrous. As Ames' animosity wanes, Jack's mystery begins to unravel. Jack and Ames have similar families; both men, one because of age, the other because of societal prejudices, do not expect much more time with them. "I was so long in the habit of seeing meanness at the root of everything he did," but with Jack's honesty about his family and his struggle for faith, Ames finally sees "the beauty there is in him" (Robinson 230, 232). The connection between the two men transforms Jack's "weariness" from anger to utter anguish. "He covered his face with his hands. And I could only forgive him," Ames writes (Robinson 230). Tension remains in the men's theologies, but Ames is able to put that aside. His preaching and practice come together as he understands that "the one sufficient reason for the forgiveness of debt is simply the existence of debt" (Robinson 161). This confirms Ames' faith that "Existence is the essential and the holy thing" (Robinson 189).

The second blessing of Jack does not come in this scene, but rather at the bus stop, when Jack leaves Gilead for good. This is the chance for reconciliation that Ames' father and grandfather never had. Despite Ames' fears, weaknesses, and belief it is a "theologically unacceptable notion" to use blessing to see through the clutter of Jack's human life and recognize grace in him, he seizes the opportunity (Robinson 201). Ames

still brings along a copy of *The Essence of Christianity*, and argues a notion of grace “I thought he should be aware [of],” but there is a new tolerance in Ames’ attitude toward Jack (Robinson 239-240). He describes Jack as polite, elegant, and brave, rather than weary, lonely, and angry. The mystery between them is already partially exposed, and this time the blessing is without water; it is simply the touch of a hand to a brow, an invitation for the grace of God.

With this new baptism, Ames repents his transgression, and is more inspired than he had been in performing any other baptism before. He reflects, “I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment” (Robinson 242). Jack can do nothing more than bow his head to receive it, but that simple act of humility lets Ames feel significant grace in the blessing. Afterward, Ames is able to tell his friend and Jack’s father, Boughton, on his deathbed, “I blessed that boy of yours for you. I still feel the weight of his brow on my hand” (Robinson 244). That “weight” is the grace he felt so strongly in other blessings, and the indication that despite the enduring tensions between the two men, something substantial, maybe even hope, was on Jack’s end of the connection as well as on Ames’.

With the understanding that all people contain the grace of God, Ames finds his greatest struggle and his greatest peace. He writes poetically, enduringly to his son, “I’m writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you’ve done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God’s grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle” (Robinson 52). Ames’ story is one of a long string of father-son conflicts, which reach past his father and grandfather, through human history. The traditions of transgression between fathers and sons and the reconciliation possible

with great love are as ancient as they are current. “It is true that we all do live in the ruins of the lives of other generations,” Ames writes (Robinson 198). Always framing his humility in prayer, Ames closes—the text, and perhaps his life—with the hope that his son will embody the best trait of each generation before him, that he will be a “brave man” like the narrator’s father, and “useful” like his grandfather (Robinson 247). He hopes that when he meets his son in Heaven, they will not be as father and son, but creatures of God’s grace, “like brothers” (Robinson 165-166).

“Beyond My Imagination”: *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri

Despite the uncommon form as a collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri explores themes of familial responsibility, cultural history, and personal healing as much as, if not more powerfully than the three novels I have studied. The stories in this book are set in either India or the Boston region of the United States (with one short exception of a few paragraphs in London). American and Indian cultures merge and clash in names, food, music, and religion. Many of the stories are based around new marriages, new families, and settling into new homes. Characters are not explicitly related, but they might be read as many generations of a single family. Similar to *Gilead*, plots witness ordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. Lahiri succeeds in creating what I found admirable in Robinson’s work: detailed, individualized characterizations that lean toward a greater understanding of the human experience.

Threads of theme, setting, and culture that run through *Interpreter of Maladies* connect the nine stories in this collection as individual pieces and as elements that constitute a whole. The book’s title, which is also the title of the third story, provides a

clue as to what readers should recognize in each story, in its place in the book, and in their grouping as a collection. The first word of the title, “interpreter,” identifies a person who has the skills to translate from one language to another. “Interpreting” is more than duplicating, because it requires an explanation or a sense of meaning to be applied in the conversion. The initial interpreter is Lahiri, who presents what she has observed of the human experience. The characters are intermediary interpreters; their perspectives incorporate Lahiri’s, but span gender and age boundaries, so that each character will apply his or her own understanding to a situation. The final interpreter is the reader, who responds to the stories in light of the writer, the characters, and her own experience. This invitation to translate with meaning, to render explicitly in terms of one’s experience, brings readers to look not only between themselves and characters, but also between stories: how does the collection inform the reader about how it is to be read, or what can be interpreted from the progression of various perspectives throughout the book.

The second part of the title, “maladies,” creates an interesting phrase. A malady is most literally a physical ailment, a disease, or an illness. “Interpreter of maladies” could be a crossword puzzle clue for a doctor, one who analyzes and diagnoses an illness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “malady” as “any such condition that calls for a remedy,” and that “condition” could be any range of societal issues—cultural, emotional, or spiritual. Although the various regions of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh represented and the different stages of migration in which characters struggle are important lenses through which to read the stories, the unifying metaphors in the collection are the universal aspects of being human—malady and remedy, misunderstanding and interpretation. It is in this context that the book is best read and, indeed, interpreted.

A short story cycle considers each story as an individual work and as representative of the whole. This structure is especially applicable to ethnic fiction, “solving the problem of representing an entire community within the necessarily limited confines of a single work by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story” (Brada-Williams). For the same reason, a short story cycle is particularly effective in expressing a “dichotomy” that can be read as general in human experience. *Interpreter of Maladies*,

features diverse and unrelated characters, a variety of narrative styles, and no common locale. [...] However, a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect. (Brada-Williams)

Considered in this context, the title story guides readers into the themes the collection confronts without limiting the voices that need to be heard.

In “Interpreter of Maladies,” Mr. Kapasi, a weekend tour guide, brings the Das family, Americans of Indian descent, to the Sun Temple at Konarak and monasteries at Udayagiri and Khandagiri. Mr. Kapasi speaks English and a number of Indian languages, and serves as a translator between foreigners and the culture of India. During the week, he works as a translator in a doctor’s office, quite literally, as an interpreter of maladies. Despite his work and his established family, the kind of profound communication he sought through learning languages as a younger man has yet to be fulfilled. The story’s narrative stays close to Mr. Kapasi, whose dreams of international interpretation are expanded and expended through his interaction with Mrs. Das. The story chronicles his progression through the cycle of life symbolized on the chariot wheels of the Sun Temple—“the cycle of creation, preservation, and achievement of realization” (Lahiri 57).

Mr. Kapasi's fantasy about a relationship with Mrs. Das demonstrates how easily interpretation can turn into misinterpretation. His imagined interaction begins with what he hears as her interested response to his interpretation job. When Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi first meet, she smiles "without displaying any interest in him," nor does she speak much to her husband or pay close attention to her daughter (Lahiri 44). Through the filter of Mr. Kapasi, the narrative observes that she and Mr. Das "behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents," a reading of American culture as lacking maturity, even infantilized (Lahiri 49). Now, Mrs. Das "breaks[s] her extended silence" to call Mr. Kapasi's work "romantic," and as far as he can see, she is responding to him in a way she responds to no one else (Lahiri 50). She seems awed at the responsibility his job holds, but her interest is a matter of his interpretation. He is a sensible man, who prefers a specially tailored suit, "for giving tours because it did not get crushed during his long hours behind the wheel" (Lahiri 44). It does not follow that he should be so flattered by a comment from a woman who is so distanced by culture, and whom he finds shallow.

Mr. Kapasi, however, is also a man with a great desire for approval, for recognition, and for human connection. Mrs. Das is in one moment a disgraceful American mother, and in the next an almost irresistible Indian woman. Physical observations about Mrs. Das, the strawberry in the center of her blouse, the water bottle sticking out of her bag, the puffed rice she stuffs into her mouth, reflect the hunger in Mr. Kapasi, and suggest Mrs. Das' potential to satisfy it (Lahiri 46). Mr. Kapasi's subjective interpretations are further evinced in an instance involving interpretation of language. Mrs. Das answers one of Mr. Kapasi's anecdotes with, "'That's so neat,'" "neat" being a word that Mr. Kapasi later admits he "was not certain exactly what [it] suggested, but he

had a feeling it was a favorable response” (Lahiri 51, 59). Mr. Kapasi interprets not only between Indian languages and English, but also what he hears into what he desires.

Mrs. Das’ affirmation of the work he sees as a “sign of his failings” is intensified when Mr. Kapasi thinks about his wife’s opinion of his job (Lahiri 52). Mrs. Kapasi regards her husband’s work not as an intellectual, even romantic challenge, but rather as a reminder of a son they lost. Mrs. Das’ comment stimulates Mr. Kapasi’s imaginings that her intrigue extends further than conversation. She suggests she will send him copies of the pictures her husband has taken, and he mentally plans a letter exchange, through which they would share personal aspects of their lives, quickly developing the meaningful bond he has been seeking for years. The idea of a relationship with Mrs. Das gives him the same pleasure he once felt in the triumph of reading a language he had been studying, “In those moments Mr. Kapasi used to believe that all was right with the world, that all struggles were rewarded, that all of life’s mistakes made sense in the end” (Lahiri 56). Interpretation of languages never fulfilled him the way he anticipated, and the expectations he sets for Mrs. Das are similarly overreaching.

Mr. Kapasi’s favorite statue on the temple describes the motivations for his desires. Earlier, in response to Mr. Das’ question about the tiresome monotony of his work as a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi says the temple is ““one of my favorite places. [...] a reward for me”” after a week of work in the doctor’s office (Lahiri 49). Originally a site of worship, the Sun Temple is now a secular, yet profound site of relaxation and comfort for Mr. Kapasi. The temple is described as a mixture of “assorted scenes from daily life” and “the countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers’

thighs” (Lahiri 57). While an erotic reading is certainly possible (especially considering Mr. Kapasi’s unsatisfying relationship with his wife), a more telling interpretation of his interest in the temple comes from the Astachala-Surya, the setting sun he enjoys most.

This Surya had a tired expression, weary after a hard day of work, sitting astride a horse with folded legs. Even his horse’s eyes were drowsy. Around his body were smaller sculptures of women in pairs, their hips thrust to one side. (Lahiri 58)

Like the god, Mr. Kapasi is tired, weary from making the same journeys week after week. The women in this statue are not entwined with lovers, but surround the Surya in what could be considered an alluring pose—even as intriguing as Mrs. Das’ legs, which Mr. Kapasi observes, “as if for his benefit alone” (Lahiri 58). He desires a union with her physically, emotionally, even spiritually that “would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations” (Lahiri 59). The statue demonstrates his desire is not because he is a man and she is a woman, nor because she is American and he is Indian, but rather because he thinks he experiences human unity with her.

The connection he seeks, however, is not as easy in reality as it is in his imagination. When Mrs. Das asks him to stay back from the family with her, she reveals that one of her children was conceived by another man, and not even her husband has known until now. The consequence of Bobby is a reminder of an ineffective sexual cure to the malady of the marital “bad match” Mr. Kapasi suspected. ““I was hoping you could make me feel better, say the right thing,”” she tells Mr. Kapasi, ““Suggest some kind of remedy”” (Lahiri 65). Indeed, Mr. Kapasi was hoping the same of her, but their interpretations of one another differ tremendously. While Mr. Kapasi compares Mrs. Das to a wife, she likens him to a parent. He looks to her as a confidant and an equal; she wants him to solve her problems. The “achievement of realization,” a natural ending to

the cycle the temple suggests, almost guarantees that one's desires will not be achieved as he expects.

At the same time that Mr. Kapasi's comment about a "close, but ultimately unattainable" relationship with Mrs. Das seems accurate, there is some degree of common ground between them (Lahiri 56). She tells him her secret because she is "'tired of feeling so terrible all the time,'" which coincides with Mr. Kapasi's weariness (Lahiri 65). That the malady of their loneliness is inherent in the human condition is reflected in their similar problems in marriage and attempts at solutions in each other. Mrs. Das seeks consolation in Mr. Kapasi because of his "'talents'" as an interpreter, in the same way that Mr. Kapasi himself sought solace in languages (Lahiri 65). With this, Lahiri establishes one of the more powerful themes in the collection.

Like the Surya, whose weariness sets in at the end of the day, Mr. Kapasi ultimately recognizes that the natural condition of the human being is at once longing for and pushing away shared presence and understanding. His and Mrs. Das' marriages establish well the dichotomy of need and inability to communicate. One critic draws the harsh conclusion that "although Mr. Kapasi might be able to interpret both his own maladies (of thwarted ambitions, thwarted desire) and those of others, no one can bridge the communicative gaps that inevitably separate human beings" (Lewis). A more nuanced interpretation of the whole collection is also valid, because through marriage, sex, love, and family, characters persistently seek the "interpreter of maladies": someone to convert their lives into meaningful experiences, communication, and connections.

In this story as in the others, "[w]e are given the freedom to create our own closure, and in many cases our own judgments as to the outcomes suggested by Lahiri's

narratives” (Brada-Williams). After Mrs. Das’ confession, Mr. Kapasi is “depressed,” even “insulted,” but “believed it was his duty to assist [her]” (Lahiri 66). The interest he had in her earlier, “that had made him check his reflection in the rearview mirror as they drove,” has dwindled, so that now, his sense of responsibility toward her is an unprejudiced interest (Lahiri 65). He tries to help by talking with her—interpreting her story, just as she asked—but she becomes furious and leaves their conversation. In the context of this story and of the collection as a cycle, her incapacity for human connection is best read as a universal malady, hindering the remedy they both need.

Just how dangerous Mrs. Das’ obstacles to communication are is quite literally demonstrated in the story’s closing action. Like a child angry with her parent’s guidance, she storms away from Mr. Kapasi, “wobbling a little on her square wooden heels, reaching into her straw bag to eat handfuls of puffed rice” (Lahiri 66). Ill-mannered and unstable, Mrs. Das unknowingly drops rice all over the ground, and fails to foresee the consequences of her inattention. Monkeys flock to the scattered food, as well as to Bobby (like Mr. Kapasi’s son and John Ames’ son, Bobby is seven years old). Although not as prevalent a theme here as in Robinson’s novel, the potential fertility in new generations hovers just beneath the surface of these stories, serving as a barometer to the fate of each story’s characters.

While a dozen monkeys tug at Bobby’s shirt and beat him with sticks, it is clear how incapable of caring for him Mr. and Mrs. Das are. Mrs. Das can do nothing more than yell for Mr. Kapasi’s help. Mr. Das, who has faded into the background behind a guide book of India and his complicated camera, worsens the problem when he accidentally hits the shutter, and incites the monkeys to assault the boy more forcefully.

Like David in *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, Mr. Das' photography keeps him at a distance from his family. We do not read Mr. Das' perspective as we read David's, and his persistence behind the camera poses the question of whether he is an observer or a participant in this scene, whether he is hiding behind the lens or seeking something through it. This question, like so many others, is ultimately reflected in Mr. Kapasi.

The story leaves Mr. Kapasi with a curious "picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind" (Lahiri 69). He rescues Bobby from the monkeys, and the boy's parents respond by wiping the dirt off of their son, sticking his visor on straight, and slapping a bandage on his leg (Lahiri 68). The superficial care they offer their son represents the dysfunction in their family, and by extension the lack of communication that would enhance the human experience if it were not so difficult to achieve. As they prepare to leave the hills, Mrs. Das "folded her arms across the strawberry on her chest," shutting Mr. Kapasi out of her family's life (Lahiri 68). As she takes her brush out of her bag to comb Bobby's hair, the paper on which Mr. Kapasi had written his address blows away, absolutely ending any correspondence they might have had before it even began.

Rather than the one romantic couple and two broken families that Mr. Kapasi imagines, the situation ends with two families, dysfunctional, but intact. In the final scene, Mr. Kapasi is "observing" the family, as the monkeys who attacked Bobby "solemnly" look down from a tree to the people below (Lahiri 69). The alternating roles of participant and observer that Mr. Kapasi plays are reflected in his earlier comment to Mr. Das that the monkeys, "are more hungry than dangerous" (Lahiri 61). This paradox of need and incapacity for satisfaction is consistent throughout the collection,

all nine stories are woven together with the frequent representations of extreme care and neglect [...] Repetitions of this dichotomy occur in a variety of

communities including whole neighborhoods, marital and extramarital relationships, and relationships between children and adults. (Brada-Williams)

The “care” for which human beings hunger is arguably “linked to love, duty or responsibility, or homesickness,” and “neglect” of meaningful communication is our greatest danger to ourselves (Brada-Williams).

Lahiri uses children’s physical maladies to explore care and neglect primarily in adult relationships. In addition to Bobby, it is mentioned briefly in “Interpreter of Maladies” that Mr. Kapasi started to work as an interpreter in the doctor’s office only after his son died of typhoid. He took the job in an attempt to “console his wife and to keep her from crying in her sleep,” and perhaps also to console himself (Lahiri 53). The first story in the collection introduces another marriage troubled by a child’s illness, and expands the idea to a figurative, rather than a physical malady.

Full of flashbacks and sparse of dialogue, “A Temporary Matter” observes Shoba and Shukumar as a series of power outages breaks the normal flow of electricity in their home, and opens a current of communication that had been closed since the still-born death of their first child. In the dark each night, Shoba and Shukumar make a game of sharing secrets and rediscover their passion for one another. When the electricity comes back too soon, their last confessions break each other’s hearts: Shoba says she is moving out, and Shukumar reveals he held their baby boy in the hospital. The possibilities borne of the story’s ambiguous conclusion emphasize the interpretation left to the reader. One critic explains that when the story ends, Shoba and Shukumar “are secretly relieved to find their marriage coming to a close” (Kakutani). I read disappointment, with hope for an eventual reunion.

Maladies involving children in this story, the title story, and, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” a story that might be read as the first part of a closing movement, teach readers to notice how interaction with others can resolve into either a communion or a separation. Bibi Haldar suffers from an illness that inexplicably throws her into seizures. Despite attempts from various members of her community, no remedy has yet been found. Eventually a doctor suggests marriage, that “‘relations will calm her blood’” (Lahiri 162). This was essentially Mrs. Das’ philosophy when she conceived Bobby, though it was probably less consciously a solution at the time. Bibi becomes pregnant, and after she delivers her baby boy, she is considered “cured” (Lahiri 172). While for Mrs. Das, the birth of her son is a constant reminder of her problems, and for Shoba and Shukumar, the still-birth of a child could mean the end of their marriage, for Bibi the sexual experience and the consequence of being a mother was exactly what she needed to more happily experience her humanity.

Besides “Interpreter of Maladies,” neither in “A Temporary Matter,” nor in any other story until “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is the word “malady” used. As elements of a cycle, these stories use maladies and remedies to explicitly consider issues of care and neglect, communication and misinterpretation, and the idea that what for some is a malady is for others a remedy. The births in these stories, their different conclusions and consequences for relationships between characters, are concrete examples of less tangible changes occurring in other lives. Whether it is into a new country, a new house, a new family, or a new marriage, characters in this book try to settle into their lives, but find their desires confronted with their limitations. Faced with Mrs. Das’ secret, Mr. Kapasi struggles to see why he in particular is trusted to understand her. “‘But we do not face a

language barrier. What need is there for an interpreter?” he asks (Lahiri 65). Time and again, people reach out to each other, across kitchens and countries, department stores and oceans, and struggle to accept and appreciate the responses they receive.

Different voices contribute stylistically and structurally to an expanded understanding of interpretation and maladies. After six stories told in close third-person narrative like the Indian tour guide in “Interpreter of Maladies,” or the young American woman in “Sexy,” and the singular first-person of a young Indian girl in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is narrated in the unusual collective first-person. The narrator’s use of “we” and “our” mean the reader cannot help but feel she is part of the community who has tried but failed to care for Bibi. “In short, Bibi’s life was an encounter with one fruitless antidote after another,” and so is this collection of stories (Lahiri 59). The narrator’s sympathy is limited, “she was not our responsibility, and in our private moments we were thankful for it” (Lahiri 167). The collection converges into a question of responsibility for the personal and societal maladies human beings face. Ultimately, the book asks whether our communities can provide remedies, or we must face our limitations, like Bibi, on our own.

The last story, “The Third and Final Continent,” confronts the question by expressing our limitations and potential solutions. As the second part of the concluding movement (the word “Final” in the title suggests a destination has been attained), the story returns to first-person narration, this time as an older man’s nostalgic look at beginning his family in the United States. For six weeks while he is searching for a home, he rents an apartment from a very old, very traditional woman named Mrs. Croft. The customs of his culture encourage him to show her some special respect, but according to

her values, he can only place his weekly rent payment in her hand rather than on the piano bench across the room. “There was nothing I could do for her beyond these simple gestures. I was not her son, and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing” (Lahiri 189). The narrator reluctantly accepts that while there is something he can do for her, there is a limit to how much of his sentiment he can express.

This narrator’s statement resonates with the statement of responsibility from “Bibi Halдар” in expressing consolation and frustration with limitations to human connection. Taken literally, these moments define familial responsibility as the most appropriate outlet for meaningful relationships. The difficulties with sex and marriage the rest of the collection presents demonstrate that being part of a family can be very difficult, especially when family is somehow different from what one has expected. The narrative structures of the book, when taken as a whole, suggest there may be hope, not in the adults that dominate the stories’ narrations, but in children’s innocent perspectives.

The stories I have introduced as primary elements of the short story cycle are narrated primarily from adult perspectives. Two other stories, “Mrs. Sen’s” and “Sexy” give secondary voice to children who play pivotal roles. In the former story, Eliot is a catalyst in Mrs. Sen’s experiment with independence. As much as her husband has encouraged her, it is the presence of this boy in her life, someone to whom she can ask questions and express her fears about the United States, someone who is hopeful and not critical, that ultimately allows her to leave the parking lot and drive away from her house.

Rohin plays a similar role in “Sexy.” The son of Miranda’s co-worker Laxmi’s cousin, Rohin unknowingly convinces Miranda of her need to end her own affair with Dev. Miranda regards what Laxmi explains about her cousin’s husband leaving the

family as a sad situation, but separate from her own. After seven-year-old Rohin tells Miranda that “sexy” means “loving someone you don’t know,” she slowly detaches herself from Dev (Lahiri 107). Through a child’s words, she realizes the damage she was doing to herself and to Dev’s marriage. The powerful presence of children in these stories is integral to the complete reading of the human condition in the book. Children’s roles as catalysts in adult relationships demonstrate the limitations of adulthood and childhood, and suggest their need to function with each other, rather than separately.

The final two stories of the book, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “The Third and Final Continent,” fluidly express continuity through generations, Indian or otherwise. Bibi’s “treatment” was to have a son; after the child’s birth, she successfully raised him and a thriving business, and her symptoms vanished. The narrator in the other story also raises a son, but in a country economically, socially, and politically different than it was when he first arrived. There are different things to wonder at, but his appreciation of life is the same, if not deeper for the range of experiences he has had. “He mourned, he loved, and he raised a child; he has, in other words, lived a life that is rich with the universal feelings that bind men and women together across continents and across time” (Bess). In both situations, being a parent has invited reflection and lasting participation in one’s world. These stories “clearly evoke a balancing dialogue through a careful mirroring of their basic plots” (Brada-Williams). The collection begins with a marriage struggling over the loss of a son, and it ends with a celebration of children that admits pain and trouble but looks forward with hope.

Looking at the full collection with the idea of generations in mind, the characters starting new homes, new marriages, and new families could be interpreted as all of a

single family. Each story represents a different perspective of life in the United States or India, but when read together, the book details not a history of immigrants or second- or third-generation Indian-Americans, but a human history; “Thus, with sympathy, understanding, and a smile, one can narrow the gap not only between spouses but also between continents” (Noor). The theme of family as both malady and remedy, consistent with the other books I have studied, emerges not within the boundaries of culture or the borders of a nation, but in the context of hope, as a fundamental element of being human.

Reminiscent of John Ames’ translation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, that, “an impressive sun shines on us all,” the closing lines in Lahiri’s final story express the universality of the book’s promise (Robinson 91).

I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri 198)

In each mile, meal, person, and room of this collection, maladies have been diagnosed and remedied, interpretations confused and clarified. Even without the ethnic quotient, the book interprets human beings in a way that satisfies the emotional and psychological therapy sought in good literature. “The value of these stories [...] lies in the fact [that] they transcend the confined borders of immigrant experience to embrace larger human issues, age-old issues that are, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘cast into the mould of these new times’ redefining America” (Noor). Despite our longings and limitations, to live a human life, in whatever country, whatever culture, whatever family, is a greater experience than one might expect, and delivers more than one could imagine.

CONCLUSION: LITERATURE, ALL ON THE SAME SHELF

For a long time, I stood behind the register of the bookstore, passing judgment on book club books and Pulitzer Prize-winning books as wholly different genres of literature. I was outraged that book club books on the “Three for Two” sale table also shared a section with the masters of literature: Dickens, Joyce, Steinbeck! I was convinced that the “Pulitzer Prize” burst printed on other books meant they were the respectable books to read. At the same time, I have long wondered how one is to know which books will become classics, and who decides which already are. This project has been a lesson in the common appeal of contemporary literature to a general audience. Though I am still recovering from high school battles reading what our ancestors deemed good literature, I am beginning to understand that the “classics” are those books that illustrate themes without letting details obstruct sympathy for the human condition. Recognizing that most classics started out as middlebrow, and that this subset allows for a range of literary and commercial quality, I have come to realize books are published to be sold. Despite any marketing strategy, the books that are ultimately successful are those that best satisfy the intellectual, emotional, psychological, and artistic demands of the reader.

Honestly, I started reading *My Sister's Keeper* with an unjustified bias against Jodi Picoult. Working at Borders, I saw seven or eight similarly sized books with her name on them in the “P” section of Literature that bore too close a resemblance to the genre fiction a few yards away. It seemed Picoult released a new novel every time I came home from BC, and I could not help assuming it was as formulaic and predictable as a romance novel. Admittedly, I never picked up one of Picoult’s books because I thought I should be spending my time as an English major reading “real” literature.

When I did read *My Sister's Keeper*, I was enthralled by the story, rooting for my favorite characters, and anxious to see what would happen at the end. However, my reflections remained within the text rather than reaching to deeper aspects of my human experience. I was irritated by the melodrama with Julia and Campbell, which felt like the kind of love story I would expect in a cheesy movie or a bad primetime drama. I was frustrated with the different font style used for each character's chapters, which questioned the strength of the characterization and insulted the reader's ability to keep track of characters. Despite the lack of intellectual and artistic qualities that are valuable to me as a reader, in close study with the other novels, I have found an appreciation for Picoult's awareness of what a middlebrow reader wants and her ability to deliver.

The Memory Keeper's Daughter satisfied me more than *My Sister's Keeper* because I was captivated by Edwards' poetic style. Her prose invites readers into the story's symbols, its history, and the past, present, and future of each character. These "disparate shards [...] knit themselves together," to keep me turning pages, while savoring each word and allowing each image to fully develop. (Edwards 8). The subject matter—rights for disabled people, battles with grief and alcohol, the practice of medicine, and photography as a hobby—serves appropriately as a secondary aspect of the novel, building images and setting a framework to color the characters' humanity. I also appreciated the ending of this novel more than Picoult's because the suspense and release are more delicate, encouraging diverse interpretation and reader involvement. The shock of Anna's death at the end of *My Sister's Keeper* read for me as a plot twist, meant to displace the anticipated resolution. David's death in *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* left

me pondering grief and secrets, relationships and responsibility, rather than contemporary medicine and ethics.

When I started this project, I believed there was a basic format that constituted a novel—setting, plot, characters, imagery—and I expected to draw a clear distinction between book club books and Pulitzer Prize-winning books. I did not anticipate the strength of the similarities between the two book club books I studied, especially in terms of characterization and conflict. Within that finely-tuned structure, I was even more surprised to discover the diversity of my own reactions. I learned that within the “book club” subset of middlebrow literature, there is great potential for commercial and literary fiction, and that the typical book club book can land anywhere on that spectrum.

While I understand why it is appropriate to consider all four of the books I studied “middlebrow” because of their appeal to a common audience, I cannot help but appreciate my more profound reactions to the Pulitzer Prize-winning books. *Gilead* shot to the top of my “favorite books” list before I finished reading it for the first time. As much as I like to read a story with a topical issue to confront, I enjoyed that this book’s subject matter was simply people, and that it “invitingly challenges its readers to entertain contradictory notions at once, and appealingly dramatizes the act of puzzling over charged questions” (O’Rourke). Ames himself admits that “the basic circumstances” of Jack’s experience, and even those of his own situation “are so commonplace that they can be dealt with in a very few words” (Robinson 156). This novel was so gratifying to read—and then so difficult to write about—because Ames uses “the plain language of his neighbors, to show them their own beauty, and the beauty of where they live, in their own tongue” (Klinkenborg). Robinson illustrates that human beings’ conflicts over time are

essentially rooted in the same fundamental problem. Historically relevant social issues, like religious doctrine, the Civil War, slavery and civil rights, are used to comment on human beings' relationships, first of all, with each other. *Gilead* accomplishes what I believe a great novel should: it confronts human nature, challenging our desires and reactions. While stretching across the country and deep into history, this story remains within one nation and one family, indicating it is the story of a common human history.

Contemporary fiction lists demonstrate that novels are far more popular than short story collections. When I asked some friends which type of book they preferred, most answered the novel, because they enjoyed being immersed in another world and coming back to it with each read. One friend admitted he considered it easier to find a good novel than a good collection of stories. Interestingly, those who preferred a mixture of reading material were English majors. They agreed that short stories could be as thought-provoking and entertaining as novels. After studying short stories at BC, I find myself in a camp with them, still enjoying novels, but also appreciating the short story's more acute sense of character development and concise, powerful plotting.

I have noticed a similar bias toward the novel in academia and the publishing industry. When I have studied short stories, they have been, with few exceptions, read from an anthology rather than a single author's collection. I had difficulty locating a professor who could help me look at Lahiri's book as a whole. One professor, who is also a published fiction author, indicated that the publishing world likewise lacks enthusiasm for short stories. Proof is Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, which was initially published in 1999 as a paperback. When the book won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Company reprinted it in hardback.

Despite popular lack of confidence in short story collections, themes of familial responsibility, cultural history, and personal healing persist as much in *Interpreter of Maladies* as in the other three books I have studied. Lahiri's book does not fit culturally or structurally into the middlebrow format I suggest, but it satisfied the emotional, psychological, intellectual, and artistic demands I place on books as well as, if not better than, the others. Lahiri's masterful language brought more tears to my eyes and challenges to my mind than most anything else I have read. In the same way that Robinson's novel transcends an ordinary human life to reveal its beauty, so does Lahiri's book allow the individual voices of her characters to speak clearly and powerfully to the joys and struggles of being human.

* * *

On April 3, 2008, I attended a reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's most recent book, *Unaccustomed Earth*, a collection of short stories released in hardback on its first run. As I stood in line to enter the sold-out theatre, I noticed a woman, nearing middle-age, engrossed in a novel by Jodi Picoult. I was too far away to read the title, but I was not entirely surprised to see it. Picoult's latest book, *Change of Heart*, was released just shy of a month earlier. I was delighted to see proof that despite their opposing emotional and intellectual categorizations, the two subsets of fiction I have studied—book club books and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winners—appeal to the same audience.

The continued work of the authors I have read (Marilynne Robinson's next novel, *Home*, is due in September 2008) convinces me of the immediate relevance of this project. It is arguable whether "middlebrow" should refer only to book club books intended for a particular sector of a general audience. I prefer to think of all four books

as middlebrow, because they satisfy readers in different ways, but they share an audience that is the majority of the contemporary American reading public. Anna Quindlen defends the infinite value of reading as an extension of being human. “If readers use words and stories as much, or more, to lessen human isolation as to expand human knowledge, is that somehow unworthy, invalid and unimportant?” (Quindlen 38). The answer is, of course, no. It is a blessing that literature appeals to so many aspects of the human being, connecting people with themselves, with one another, and with their world.

Picoult, Edwards, Robinson, and Lahiri all produce work that satisfies their audience and creates a demand for more books. As an English major, I am excited for the academic, artistic, and commercial endurance of the literature I love. Phenomena like book clubs and literary awards draw special recognition to books, which speaks to the various purposes of literature. In an academic context, the style, format, and language are analyzed. In a publisher’s office, information and drama are emphasized to draw customers. In the reader’s hands, there are no cut-and-dry distinctions of how literature will affect her, because reading is a unique conversation between a reader and a writer.

At the Lahiri reading, there was one particular question I hoped would be asked, and fortunately, Lahiri obliged. Lahiri has published both short stories and a novel, and she was asked about the differences between the two forms for her as a writer. I was hoping for a validation of the short story, a bolstering of this genre I have recently learned to love (clearly there remain literary biases in my mind). I was much happier with her actual response. Lahiri stated unequivocally and confidently that, as a writer and as a reader, she detests the line drawn between the two, and insisted that no matter the form, a story is a story.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Professor Judith Wilt, for her guidance over the last year, for asking important questions and helping me to explore my responses. Thanks also to my parents and friends, who indulged my conversations and supported my progress. A.M.D.G.